Patterns of Love: A Sociological Analysis of Attachment Styles and Socio-Cultural Influences in India

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores romantic relationships through the lens of attachment theory. It utilises sociological perspectives to reveal how early emotional patterns are shaped and sustained within larger cultural contexts. This paper undertakes a thematic review of recent Indian empirical studies (2018–2024) on adult romantic attachment, interpreting them through a sociological lens. It also highlights how behaviours, such as emotional withdrawal, insecurity, and trust issues, are not merely psychological but products of gendered socialisation, family dynamics, and caste-class hierarchies. This paper underscores the issue of emotional burdens being disproportionately placed on women, who are often expected to maintain relational harmony in patriarchal settings. By situating personal romantic struggles within broader systems of inequality, this paper challenges the individualistic framing of love and calls for a more intersectional and sociologically grounded understanding of attachment.

FULL PAPER

Introduction

"We are all fools in love." (Moggach, 2005) This famous line from the 2005 film adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* captures the chaos and irrationality often associated with romantic relationships. Love often appears as a deeply personal emotion that defies logic and makes even the most rational minds appear foolish. However, what we experience in romantic relationships is not merely private; these emotions and behaviours are shaped by early attachment patterns, which are carried into adulthood through deeply embedded social structures such as the family, community, and broader cultural systems.

John Bowlby originally developed attachment theory to explain the bond between a child and the caregiver. It demonstrates how individuals form internal templates for intimacy, trust, and emotional regulation, which are fundamental components of human development (Flaherty & Sadler, 2011). According to Schneider, Gruman, and Coutts (2011), attachment begins in infancy and serves an evolutionary function. It ensures protection by maintaining proximity to caregivers. Early experiences with closeness, loss, and emotional regulation during infancy shape lasting patterns of attachment behaviour in adulthood, particularly in romantic relationships.

Attachment refers to the emotional bond formed between individuals. Infant attachment, as defined by Bowlby (1969) and observed by Ainsworth et al. (1978), refers to the child's emotional bond with their primary caregiver, which is reflected in behaviours such as clinging or crying upon separation. A child's early experiences with the caregiver shape his/her adult attachment styles, which can be understood as patterns of relating to others in romantic and emotional contexts. As theorized by Bartholomew (1990) and Shaver & Hazan (1994), adults typically exhibit four types of attachment styles: secure (trusting and open to intimacy), preoccupied (needy and anxious about abandonment), fearful-avoidant (craving closeness but fearing rejection), and dismissing-avoidant (valuing independence and avoiding intimacy). These styles reflect one's view of the self and others, and they influence how individuals approach love, trust, and vulnerability in relationships. This paper argues that these templates are not merely psychological constructs because they are continuously shaped and reinforced within specific social contexts, including family dynamics, gender roles, and cultural expectations. The paper aims to explore the sociological aspects of attachment, which have been underexplored. Disrupted attachment experiences in childhood can manifest in adulthood as emotional

withdrawal, difficulties with trust, or instability in romantic bonds. These are often understood as purely personal failures or a result of emotional immaturity. This paper posits that such patterns must be seen not just as individual psychological issues, but as social phenomena shaped by structural forces that govern emotional expression, particularly in societies like India.

Literature Review

Building on Bowlby's idea of attachment as an evolved behavioural system designed to ensure survival (Sroufe & Waters, 1977), it follows that the expression and continuity of these behaviours are not merely biological. Although attachment begins as a biologically adaptive survival system in infancy, its development into adulthood is not purely instinctive. Our earliest relational experiences, particularly with emotionally unavailable or inconsistent caregivers, shape internal working models that guide how we seek intimacy and manage emotional needs in adult life. According to Main (1990) and later expanded by Mikulincer and Shaver (2003, 2007), unreliable or inconsistent caregiving environments often lead to the development of secondary attachment strategies, such as hyperactivation (associated with anxious attachment) and deactivation (linked to avoidant attachment). These strategies that once served a protective function in early life tend to become maladaptive in adult romantic relationships, where emotional closeness, trust, and mutual regulation are vital. Thus, emotional struggles in love are often not mere personal failings but instead deeply rooted responses to early attachment disruptions and socialisation patterns.

The following table presents a consolidated view of key thinkers and findings in the field of attachment theory, reinforcing the idea that maladaptive relational patterns in adulthood often stem from early attachment disruptions:

Table 1: Summary of key authors, themes, and findings on attachment insecurity

S.No.	Author(s)	Theme	Key Contributions/Findings
1.	John Bowlby (1980, 1988)	Attachment insecurity and maladjustment	Insecure attachment reduces resilience and contributes to the development of emotional problems.
2.	Main (1990)	Secondary attachment strategies	Introduced the idea of hyperactivation and deactivation as defence mechanisms.

3.	Shaver & Hazan (1993)	Avoidant attachment outcomes	Avoidant individuals show hostility, loneliness, and difficulty with intimacy.
4.	Zuroff & Fitzpatrick (1995)	Depression in avoidant	Avoidant attachment can lead to perfectionism, self-criticism, and depressive tendencies.
5.	Berant et al. (2001)	High-stress outcomes	In stressful situations, avoidant people experience greater distress and poorer coping.
6.	Mikulincer & Shaver (2003, 2007)	Adult attachment theory	Reviewed how anxious and avoidant attachments impact emotion regulation, health, therapy, and social adjustment.

Source: Compiled from Shaver & Mikulincer (2008)

Attachment theory has significantly advanced our understanding of how early relational experiences with caregivers shape emotional regulation and attachment patterns in adulthood. However, it limits our understanding of romantic relationship struggles primarily as outcomes of individual psychological histories. For instance, secondary attachment strategies such as anxious hyperactivation or avoidant deactivation develop as coping mechanisms in response to inconsistent caregiving but become maladaptive in adult intimate relationships. This perspective risks overlooking the broader cultural and structural contexts within which intimate relationships unfold. As shown in cross-cultural research (Goodwin, 1999; Hamon & Ingoldsby, 2003, as cited in Schneider, Gruman, & Coutts, 2011), the values individuals attach to relationships, such as autonomy, emotional closeness, or practical compatibility, are profoundly shaped by cultural systems. Thus, many romantic failures cannot be fully understood through psychological explanations alone; they must also be situated within the sociocultural systems that shape who we love and how we love. This paper aims to address this research gap by integrating insights from attachment theory with a sociological lens, emphasising that emotional struggles in love are not merely personal failings but often the product of both early relational experiences and cultural conditioning.

The following studies reveal how attachment styles are shaped by early socialisation, manifest in gendered and culturally specific patterns of behaviour in adult romantic relationships.

Table 2: Empirical studies on attachment styles and romantic relationships in the Indian sociocultural context

S.No.	Author & Year	Study Details (Sample, Method, Focus)	Key Findings
1.	Shah et al. (2018)	Sample of 24 married Indian adults (13F, 11M), aged 25–45. Tools: RAAS (Revised Adult Attachment Scale) and ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale. After filtering, N = 20.	Individuals who are securely attached reported the highest marital satisfaction. Preoccupied styles showed the lowest satisfaction, while dismissive styles showed moderate satisfaction; the results for fearful styles were inconclusive due to the small sample size.
2.	Sharma and Kaushik (2024)	A survey-based study with 100 Indian participants (50 males, 50 females), aged 18–39, from multiple cities utilised the AAS-R, RAS, and ECR-S scales.	Attachment styles affect relationship satisfaction, emotional development, identity formation, conflict resolution, and communication. Cultural norms and gender expectations strongly influence relationship dynamics.
3.	Das & Bhatt (2024)	135 Indian young adults (18–29), quantitative survey and t-test on conflict & attachment styles.	Avoidant and anxious attachment styles are linked to avoidance in conflict; women scored higher in collaboration.

| 4. | Baruah & Sutar (2024) | Qualitative study using purposive sampling; 15 young adults (9 female, six male)

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews, Thematic analysis. | Communication styles, conflict resolution, and emotional expression are linked to attachment styles. Childhood emotional deprivation impacts trust and reciprocity in adult relationships. Family communication patterns shape emotional expression and attachment style. |
| 5. | Chandr, Pandey, & Sarraf (2024) | Sample Size of 100 young adults (70 females, 30 males) between the ages of 19 and 25 years. Research Design was a Correlation study.

Tools Used: State Adult Attachment Measure (SAAM), Big Five Inventory (BFI), Experiences in Close Relationships– Relationship Structures (ECR-RS) | Anxiously attached young adults tend to be needy, hyper vigilant, and fear abandonment, seeking constant reassurance from both parents. Avoidantly attached individuals tend to prefer emotional distance, are self-reliant, and often avoid seeking support, particularly from their fathers. In contrast, securely attached individuals exhibit emotional balance, trust, and closeness in their parental relationships, reflecting healthier bonds with both their mother and father. |

Love, Attachment, and Structure: Thematic Interpretations from Indian Context

Drawing from a range of empirical studies conducted in India between 2018 and 2024, this section presents a thematic analysis of how adult attachment styles manifest within romantic relationships and how structural and cultural conditions shape these. The selected studies used both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore relational dynamics, conflict resolution, and emotional intimacy. Six key themes were identified based on recurring patterns in the data. Each theme is interpreted sociologically to uncover how emotions often considered private or

internal are intensely regulated by gender roles, institutional norms, and early socialisation.

Emotional Withdrawal

Attachment-related emotional withdrawal, particularly among men, must be seen through the lens of gendered socialisation. In Indian society, boys are often discouraged from expressing vulnerability, resulting in an internalised expectation to appear emotionally self-sufficient. This gender norm contributes to avoidant attachment styles in adulthood, where emotional availability is perceived as weakness. As Das and Bhatt (2024) suggest, emotional detachment is not a personal flaw but a reflection of broader norms of masculinity, which limit emotional responsiveness and reinforce power dynamics in intimate partnerships.

Trust Issues

Trust within romantic relationships is not developed in isolation; it is built upon early family communication patterns and childhood emotional experiences. Baruah and Sutar (2024) reveal that emotional deprivation in the family setting can significantly damage an individual's ability to trust in romantic relationships. In sociological terms, this speaks to how the institution of family, particularly in emotionally restrictive households, regulates intimacy and contributes to long-term relational anxieties. The trust deficit is often carried forward into adult relationships, undermining the development of secure bonds.

Marital Instability

Shah et al. (2018) show that securely attached individuals report higher marital satisfaction, while those with preoccupied or dismissive styles face greater instability. In the Indian context, the arranged marriage system introduces unique relational dynamics, where emotional bonding often develops post-marriage. The attachment system is tested in a socially orchestrated union, where expectations of loyalty, respect, and adjustment may clash with underlying insecurities. The contrast between arranged and love marriages offers insight into how structural arrangements shape emotional outcomes and reinforce or buffer attachment challenges.

Romantic Insecurity

Romantic insecurity is frequently misinterpreted as personal inadequacy, but these studies reveal its social roots. Factors such as caste, class, and gender influence how individuals express their emotional needs and the type of validation they receive. For instance, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be

expected to suppress emotional needs in favour of practical stability. At the same time, upper-caste men might be given license to withhold vulnerability. Sharma and Kaushik (2024) note that these inequities inform both relationship expectations and attachment security, showing that insecurity is not only internal but also socially patterned.

Gender Roles

Findings across these studies highlight the relationship between gender and emotional labour. Women are more likely to adopt collaborative management styles, while men lean toward competitive or avoidant behaviours, rooted in early gendered conditioning (Das & Bhatt, 2024). Sociologically, this reinforces the idea that women are expected to manage emotional harmony, while men are socialised to maintain autonomy and authority. These roles are institutionalised through family norms, education, and media, resulting in attachment styles that reflect broader structural inequalities rather than individual personalities.

Family as an Institution

Family is a central social institution that nurtures and regulates emotional expression. When emotional needs are unmet in childhood, due to stigma, neglect, or rigid communication norms, it often goes unacknowledged due to cultural taboos around emotional distress. Baruah and Sutar (2024) highlight the impact of childhood emotional deprivation on later trust and emotional regulation. This reflects how attachment issues are not just psychological residues but outcomes of institutional failures to provide emotional safety during key developmental stages.

While this paper has primarily focused on gender, caste, class, and family as key structural forces shaping attachment, it is also important to note that regional and religious variations within India influence emotional expression and relational expectations. For instance, norms surrounding emotional intimacy, gender roles, and marital dynamics can differ significantly between a more matrilineal culture like Kerala and a patriarchal, caste-bound context like Rajasthan. Similarly, religious frameworks, whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or others, offer differing ideals regarding love, duty, and relational hierarchy. Though not examined in depth here, these variations further complicate how attachment styles are shaped and expressed in intimate relationships, warranting future sociological inquiry.

Together, these themes reveal that adult attachment behaviour in romantic relationships is not simply the outcome of individual pathology. Instead, it is socially scripted through gendered norms, caste-class hierarchies, and familial conditioning. Emotional struggles such as withdrawal, insecurity, or mistrust must therefore be

seen as expressions of structural inequality. This sociological lens expands the explanatory power of attachment theory, illustrating that personal relationship challenges often reflect broader social arrangements, particularly in culturally layered societies like India.

Conclusion

Romantic relationships are profoundly shaped by early attachment patterns embedded within larger social structures. In the Indian context, structures such as the patriarchal family, rigid gender norms, and unequal socio-economic systems play a decisive role in moulding emotional expression and intimacy. As this study has shown, adult attachment behaviours like emotional withdrawal and relational insecurity are not merely outcomes of childhood caregiving but are a result of gendered socialisation and cultural expectations.

Indian women, in particular, bear a disproportionate burden of emotional labour. Drawing on Hochschild's (1983) notion of emotional labour, it becomes evident that women are expected to manage not only their own emotions but also those of their partners, often in environments where emotional reciprocity is lacking. Talcott Parsons' (1955) characterisation of women as expressive and men as instrumental continues to resonate in modern relationships, portraying emotional responsibility as a feminine duty and autonomy as a masculine privilege.

When intersecting with caste, class, and locality, these patterns become more complex. Women from marginalised backgrounds often navigate multiple layers of emotional and relational stress, without the institutional or relational support to do so safely. Therefore, romantic dysfunctions like avoidance or insecurity should be viewed not as personal inadequacies but as sociologically constructed outcomes of systemic inequality.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the difficulties we face in love are not just failures of the heart but reflections of a broader social architecture that governs how we attach, express, and suffer in relationships. Recognising the sociological underpinnings of attachment styles offers a more holistic understanding of love. It does not isolate individuals but situates their struggles within the contexts that shaped them.

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