



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## "Rosa Schweers: A Casteless German's Voyage Through Displacement, Estrangement, Patriarchal Challenges, And Unacceptance"

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### Abstract:

In South Asian Diasporic Literature, Anita Rau Badami is among the most well-known authors. Her novels predominantly focus on rootlessness themes such as displacement, estrangement, loss of identity, patriarchal challenges, unacceptance, and self-identity exploration. Her third literary work, *Can You Hear the Nightbird's Call?* intends to elucidate the condition of a settler's life in a foreign land through the character Leela and her mother Rosa Schweers. Both battle to assert their identities in an alien land to manage their connection with an unfamiliar culture and toil to set up a new abode for them. Rosa's in-laws do not accept her, as they consider her a 'casteless German.' Whereas, Leela as a combination of two identities is overlooked by her relatives due to her mixed cultural and racial background. By including the idea of in-betweenness through diaspora, Badami has expanded her novel. She emphasizes the word "in-betweenness" to explain the notion of multiculturalism. Through various incidents, Anita Rau Badami has revealed the cultural clash and the journey of adjusting to these cultures. This article explores in depth her mother Rosa Schweers, her origin, her marriage to an Indian, her traumatic experiences at her in-law's house, her restricted relationship with her daughter Leela, and her untimely death.

**Keywords:** Displacement, Estrangement, Casteless German, Patriarchal Challenges, and Unacceptance

### Introduction:

Rosa Schweers is the minor female character in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* She is Leela's mother, one of the female protagonists. Rosa Schweers is the only German character in the entire novel. She is mentioned in Part Two of the novel in the chapter "Half-and-Half" by Anita Rau Badami (2006). This chapter speaks exclusively on Leela and the people associated with her. This piece of writing delves deeply into the life of Rosa Schweers, examining her background, her marriage to an Indian man, the distressing situations she faced in her in-law's home, her constrained relationship with her daughter Leela, and her premature passing.

Schweers is derived from the Middle High German word “swaere” which means grieved or sad. It refers to someone who was grieved or saddened. In this novel, Rosa Schweers experiences grief in the house of Shastri. Kavipriya (2019) highlights the liminal area that shines a light on a wide range of issues, including racism, prejudice, alienation, nostalgia, and a sense of not belonging. Finally, these problems become acidic experiences and leave scars. Within around ten years, Rosa underwent various experiences of migration, dislocation, alienation, patriarchal challenges, hatred, and unacceptance from her husband’s family. Kavipriya (2019) showcases the themes explored in Badami's novel including a sense of not belonging, being cut off from one's roots, tense relationships, adjusting to new surroundings, blending into a new culture, dealing with cultural disputes, and the search for one's own identity.

Residing in London, Rosa Schweers unusually encounters her husband Hari Shastri. While Rosa was watering her plants, Hari was passing by beneath it. Unfortunately, the flower pot hit his head, making him unconscious, making Rosa feel guilty and pity for him. The theme of pity and kindness is observed here. As said by Badami (2006), when his eyes awakened, he “had promptly fallen in love?” with the grey-eyed woman. It led to marriage which shows Hari Shastri, who belonged to high caste Hindu Brahmin “married Rosa Schweers, a casteless German woman of no known family?.” This signifies the need to have a caste identity if you are staying in India. It also emphasizes the caste system that has predominated the Indian society since ancient times and how relevant it is today.

Kavipriya (2019) in her article, mentions that in the novel, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* when Badami writes about her characters, she emphasizes how they are juggling two different cultures. She is one of the few female writers who best exemplifies the value of mixing two cultures. Rosa Schweers, Leela, and Bibiji are the female characters who encounter this diversification in the novel.

Marriage paved the way for Rosa to leave her land and migrate to India along with her husband for whom she left everything associated with her. The institution of marriage expects women to alienate themselves and give priority to their husbands and their relationship. Women become a victim of this situation. Rosa, originally of German descent, opted to depart from both Germany and her adopted home in London to establish a new life in India. This illustrates a dual sense of estrangement experienced by Rosa, ultimately resulting in her detachment from her country of origin and her previously settled nation. In Kumari’s (2022) article, Vijay Mishra, a diasporic theorist, claims that “family networks” enable new diasporas to maintain their ties to their ancestral countries. Badami (2006) focuses on Rosa and that she could not accomplish this by reaching out to her known ones, as “she had lost contact with her family long ago”. As World War I and II broke out during that time, it left everyone dislocated and alienated. Leela’s birth “in 1938” as mentioned by Badami (2006) and World War II distanced Rosa from her family. Through Kumari's (2022) article we realize that the book enables us to see how the author strives to emphasize how her characters constantly feel connected to their original roots even though they are residing in a distant country, a country that only exists in their imaginations.

Through Anita Rau Badami’s novel (2006), we observe that she was considered “a casteless German woman of no known family”, “Half-breed,” and “Worse than an untouchable” by her mother-in-law Akka. This highlights the extent of discrimination experienced by Rosa who felt separated and isolated at her in-laws' home. Marriage makes a woman feel left out from others as she begins her life in a new dwelling. However, when a woman is considered as ‘the other’ in her husband’s house, it is evident that she will never be accepted in the hearts and minds of her in-laws. As she did not come under the category of caste, Akka thought that her “foreign daughter-in-law was a disgrace to the family name” as written in the novel by Badami (2006). Due to this, Leela too encounters alienation from her family members. In Badami’s (2006) words, she was considered “the half-and-half child of mismatched parents.” by her family members. They never considered her as their own except for Venki, the servant.

As Badami (2006) notes, there was a hateful relationship between Rosa and her mother-in-law Akka. “Rosa was sick of the people in this house, particularly her mother-in-law, Akka.” In line with Badami’s (2006) statement, Akka considered her daughter-in-law as “a conniving trollop who had snared her innocent son while he was lost in a foreign country”. Here, Akka compares Rosa to a disreputable woman, just like the prostitutes, who plots, attracts, and controls the conscience of a man. This proves the marginalization and humiliation done by Akka towards Rosa. Akka becomes a driving force that is instrumental in promoting patriarchy. Within a patriarchal structure, it is often the senior female member of the family who tends to marginalize the younger daughter-in-law.

Bell Hooks in her essay ‘Understanding Patriarchy’ (2010) speaks that patriarchy is explored as a multifaceted concept that involves the creation, endorsement, and sustenance of a specific type of discourse or ideological framework. Akka, the senior member of the Shastri family is seen as someone who carries forward this patriarchal setting within her household. Hence, in Badami’s (2006) words, “She refused to call Rosa by her name or to acknowledge that she was married to Hari Shastri”. It reflects the amount of discouragement and disrespect given by the mother-in-law by not accepting her as their family member. This leads to the suffocation that Rosa Schweers experiences in Akka’s home making her “ill” both physically and mentally. As Hooks (2010) points out, in a patriarchal society, certain roles and codes must be followed. It is a justified idea that we have made up or invented. Patriarchy enforces a hegemonic order. Space becomes quite crucial. Moreover, Akka was the elder member of the family, she dominated everyone below her. Everyone obeyed her, except Rosa.

Rosa Schweers was not a traditional woman who could tolerate everything that came by. Due to Akka’s unacceptance towards Rosa, Rosa started taking revenge on Akka by annoying her in various ways. In Badami’s (2006) words, “Her favourite method of annoying her mother-in-law... was to order the servant Savitri to bring her a tiffin-carrier full of mutton or a chicken biryani from a Muslim restaurant in the town market”. As the novelist Anita Rau Badami points out, (2006) Savitri, a minor female character plays “a tennis ball” between Rosa and her mother-in-law. She becomes a means of getting food for “the white wife” in the unconventional house of Shastri.

Rosa plotted against her vegetarian mother-in-law by eating non-vegetarian food in her house. In a high-caste Hindu Brahmin household, the consumption of any form of meat was deemed unacceptable. It emphasizes the strained relationship between vegetarians and those who consume non-vegetarian food, characterized by animosity. It also illustrates the long-standing tradition among high-caste Brahmins of exclusively consuming vegetarian meals within their households, and how Rosa disrupted this conventional practice of dietary choices. It gives us a background of pre-independence India wherein most Indians were vegetarians. Muslim eateries became a convenient option for those who enjoyed consuming meat. This also highlights the longstanding tradition of this community engaging in this business.

In Badami’s words (2006), Rosa had a mere “battle” with her mother-in-law Akka. The novel speaks about Rosa winning and losing the battle occasionally. It speaks about a woman’s struggle to battle out all odds to adjust to her new dwelling. When she was unable to win it, she would remove her frustration in the form of abuse in various languages or expose her figure in front of others through her transparent clothing. She did not have anyone to support her including her husband, Hari. This indicates the limited access to revolt Rosa possessed at her in-law’s place.

Badami (2006) articulates the infuriation of Akka towards Rosa through the repetitive words “Go back!” She also highlights the theme of hatred when Akka says “Go back where you came from, you piece of trash!” Here Rosa is compared to a meagre trash which is something nobody likes to keep to themselves and wishes to stay aloof from. Rosa was treated as trash because of the patriarchal and cultural dominance that prevailed in the household, leaving her alone to deal with her issues. As discussed by Hooks (2010), patriarchy often speaks about a perpetrating man and a suffering woman. Here Rosa becomes a victim of multiple sufferings. She suffers the unacceptance of Akka, she suffers the non-support given by her husband Hari who remains numb throughout the narrative. She also suffers from other family members of the

household who neither support her nor accept her as their own. They become the ardent followers of Akka, the dominating personality of the patriarchal system.

As a result, Rosa decides to divorce and part ways with Hari and his family. However, losing contact with her family, Leela's birth, and World War II made Rosa handicapped from all sides leaving her with no option but to refrain from separating and tolerate everything that came by. In Badami's (2006) words, Rosa "lost interest in everything, including quarrelling with Akka." Badami (2006), in her novel, highlights the plight of a woman who loses interest even with her child. "She locked herself in the bedroom for long periods of time, ignoring the maid who brought the infant to her to be fed." This reveals how Rosa isolated herself from the world around her by staying in her bedroom and coming out only on rare occasions "would wander down the stairs and out, alone, into the backyard" "at dusk" as pointed out by Badami (2006). In line with Badami's (2006) statement, this shows the psychological trauma experienced by Rosa who wanders in the dark because of Akka's "barbed reminders".

As Badami (2006) points out, the frequent questioning of Akka as "But this girl, where does she belong? Tell me, somebody, *where?*" reminds Rosa of her dislocated existence or mere no existence in her husband's family. Badami (2006) compares the situation of Rosa and Leela by giving reference to King Trishanku emphasizing the chapter title "Half-and-Half". In line with Kumari's (2022) statement, poet Nissim Ezekiel describes, we must find grace at home. For Leela and Rosa, though, it was different. Badami (2006) through her writings brings out the helplessness and embarrassment experienced by Leela when she mentions "Was it Leela's fault that she was the product of that union? ...Leela feels as if her heart would burst with shame and hurt." Kumari (2022) points out the distance between Leela and Rosa when Badami (2006) states "She would hide away in the Gods' room and pray to the silent silver idols there to make her mother disappear, to erase Rosa Schweers as if she had never been, for only then would she, Leela Shastri, begin to exist whole and unblemished".

This speaks of Leela who was alienated from her mother and performs black magic and becomes the cause for her untimely death. Badami shows the culture of India and the worship of many deities to fulfill certain desires. Through Badami's (2006) words, Rosa speaks her heart out to Leela when she says "Never forget you are mine. Even though you have their brown skin, you see the world with my grey eyes." This signifies the longing that Rosa had for her daughter. Though Rosa loved Leela, there was a gap that could not be filled because of the traumatic experiences Rosa encountered especially through Akka. Badami (2006) focuses on her hatred which is clearly understood when she abuses them in front of Leela stating "They are wicked, filthy creatures, pigs, dirtyevilpigs."

Anita Rau Badami also gives a glimpse of Hari who alienates himself with both Rosa and Leela. Even though they are its perpetrators, patriarchy portrays males as victims. The ontology of victimhood is entirely deconstructed by patriarchy. Both a discursive phenomenon and an experiential phenomenon are used to describe patriarchy. As Hooks (2010) points out, the importance of space increases. Just like Rosa, Hari experiences limited space in his household, who too suffers as he cannot make justice and peace between his wife and his mother. Anita Rau Badami (2006) shows the helplessness of Hari when she states "He too abandons his daughter to the servants, waking early to leave for work and returning only late in the evenings."

Rosa goes out in the dark alone every evening. This is the only time Rosa comes out of her bedroom. According to Badami (2006), Leela shows an interest in her mother suddenly. "With a sudden, intense longing Leela followed her mother" to "a green, scummy pond at the end of the property" in their backyard. As Badami (2006) points out, this pond becomes significant to Rosa as it soothes her making "her entire body relaxing." The slime-filled pond is symbolic of a closed mind, a mind filled with prejudices.

In Badami's (2006) words, a "place full of shadows" becomes a desired place for Rosa because of the cruel experiences that she faces within the house. Rosa prefers a stagnant pond of water which signifies her hatred for all her relationships. The twilight is suggestive of her disillusionment with her family. Especially by her

husband, who had vowed to cherish her, through thick and thin, till death do us part. The darkness metaphorically speaks of her emotions of not being accepted. Since they wish her to leave and disappear, she always wanders during these hours of darkness, which poignantly expresses the suffering of Rosa.

As it is a silent place, Leela makes a slapping sound. According to Badami (2006), it made Rosa “whirled around.” “She lost her balance and fell, arms flailing, face-first into the pond.” “Leela waited,” only to see “Rosa lay still,” in the pond. Badami (2006) shows the longing that Leela had for her mother through the repeated words “to rise up”. However, Badami (2006) gives a glimpse of the black magic that Leela performed against her mother which successfully took her life overpowering her love and longing which she had for her mother. It shows that Rosa died being “Neither here nor there.” Rosa experienced a loss of identity as she was never accepted as a daughter-in-law till her death. As Kumari (2022) points out in the later part of the novel, Leela’s life also ends similarly as the aircraft descends and goes down into the Atlantic Ocean highlighting what Badami (2006) says “Remember, it’s an in-between space. Neither here nor there. It is dangerous.”

Badami (2006) focuses on the theme of loneliness that is commonly observed in Rosa, Hari, and Leela. In Badami’s (2006) words, Hari “usually spent his afternoons, alone,” whereas Rosa “rested upstairs in her darkened bedroom.” Leela was “abandoned” by both of her parents, “In the end, it was Venki who brought up Leela.” It shows the detachment that prevailed due to patriarchal notions. As mentioned in the article of Kavipriya (2019), Badami, through her novel, *Can You Hear the Call of the Nightbird?* demonstrates how the diversity of cultures influences people's daily lives.

Throughout the novel, Anita Rau Badami (2006) mentions Rosa Schweers again only once in Chapter Seven-Indra’s Net, when Bibi-ji questions Leela about her “parents” while seeing “a black-and-white photograph of Hari Shastri and Rosa Schweers carrying an infant Leela.” Bibi-ji describes Rosa as “a gori” “a white woman” emphasizing the fact that she is a non-native in India, someone who does not fit in the Indian context. She focuses on her “eyes” stating that Leela got them from her mother and she looks at the world “With eyes that see just the way the goras do?” alienating Leela from her Indian identity and making her one with the foreigners. The loss of identity and in-between space is something that Rosa and Leela both encounter till their death.

### **Conclusion:**

In the poignant tale of Rosa Schweers, we encounter not just a chronicle of hardship and discrimination, but a testament to the enduring strength of the human spirit. Schweers' life, marred by displacement, estrangement, patriarchal challenges, and unacceptance, paints a stark picture of the hurdles faced by those who dare to challenge societal norms. Sadly, her journey was tragically cut short by an untimely death, reminding us of the fragility of life. Through Rosa’s story, Badami gives us a melancholic reminder that we need to deal with the obstacles and bigotry that still cripple our society. By giving an example of her personal experiences, Anita Rau Badami depicts the everlasting desire for self-identity through her female characters especially Rosa and her daughter Leela. Schweers’ endurance and courage in the visage of challenges motivate us to toil for a society where every individual can find acceptance and fulfillment regardless of their background or circumstances. In remembering her, the author gives a call to all of us so that we put extra effort into eradicating discrimination and injustice for a righteous and empathetic world as a mark of respect for her. Throughout the novel, Badami instills us to accept diversity, challenge the present situation, and aim for an optimistic future for all.

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