Princess amidst Ruins

"Princess amidst ruins"—such is the picture that is likely to imprint itself in the mind of the reader of Indira Goswami’s *An Unfinished Autobiography*. Daughter of an important government official, Indira went to school on an elephant. According to “popular accounts”, her father rode an elephant with “a huge pair of tusks across which hung a cradle-like wooden platform” (Goswami 70). Her family background is one of regality. Her beauty, sensibilities and bearing were those of a princess. Quite a few literary personalities such as Amrita Pritam, the Assamese writer Homen Bargohain (who requested Indira Goswami to write her autobiography when she was just twenty six!), Gulabdas Broker (the famous Gujarati writer), Dr. Harbhajan Singh (who, along with Amrita Pritam, is credited for revolutionizing Punjabi poetry writing style), as well as many engineers and military men admired her for her aristocratic qualities.

However, the mesmeric quality of her *An Unfinished Autobiography* owes to the long procession of pictures of decay, dilapidation and ruins it presents.

These images start issuing from the early pages. Consider the description of the Rajasthan village landscape where her engineer husband Madhavan worked: “The last rays of the sun were scattered over a number of
old dilapidated forts situated on tracts of sand looking like grains of bone ... . The sunbeams were ... like lean skeletons of golden-haired princesses flung in the plains. A cluster of only bare bones, without any trace of flesh” (Italics added, Goswami 25). When in Kashmir, near the Pak border, this is how she sketches a Patton tank: “Like a huge skeleton of a pre-historic mammal, there was lying before us the tank ...” (Italics added, Goswami 42). Her note on the festive look that her husband’s house in Bangalore wore includes a quick line on the “old discoloured photograph” of Madhu’s (that is how she lovingly calls her husband) father. Extraordinarily heedful is Indira Goswami to details of disrepair and damage. As a lecturer in Delhi University, she informs us that she “took a keen interest in the old ruins and monuments of Delhi and spent much time visiting them” (Goswami 90).

The image governing Indira Goswami’s attitude to life appears to be one that has to do with debris and rubble. Her criticism of a sycophant ruler under the British regime, for instance, focuses on the ruler’s alleged figurative praise of the British on the occasion of Lord Lytton’s Delhi Durbar. She quotes from a speech attributed to the Raja of Indore: “India has been, till now, a vast heap of stones. Some of them big, some of
them small. Now the house is built, and from roof to basement, each stone of it, is in its right place” (Italics added, Goswami 91). Such “display of loyalty” to Imperialist rule throws up an image-pattern that is indeed rude. The Imperialist present is a house in order, but the Indian past was, for this Rajah, a ruinous heap of stones. In Indira, on the other hand, the colonial image-pattern gets reversed; the reality of the present is marked by dilapidation and decay.

Such a perception as Indira’s could well be deeply spiritual and not merely political. The present is no pointer to unaging spirit; on the other hand, it smells of decay. Referring to her long stay in the city of Vrindaban, she cites the common remark that fronted her: “How can one, accustomed to comfortable living, live in dilapidated temple precincts? The very idea is absurd” (Goswami 99). Indira's explanation is: “Few would imagine that we led a simple and austere life, even though our parents were well-to-do” (Goswami 99).

Vrindaban, as depicted in An Unfinished Autobiography, tellingly enact the drama of the unaging spirit's sojourn in the wasting body. Even as Indira, in response to her teacher’s invitation, reaches Vrindaban, the cityscape gains significance:
The scattered pieces of ruins appeared to be not so much as parcels of old temples as visible symbols of the transitoriness and meaninglessness of human life. (Goswami 104)

... dig where you may at Vrindaban, you’re sure to be rewarded with some ancient relics of a temple, or a tower, or a pillar or a dome. Or it may also be part of a well-formed bosom of a dancing gopi, or the piece of the flute of Lord Krishna, Muralidhar himself. (Goswami 104-5)

Pictures of ruin and disrepair that proliferate in Indira Goswami’s self-narration are not merely indicative of her private philosophical inclinations. Her autobiography is of great value for the way in which it imagistically unveils the condition of a society whose members are mostly degraded, neglected wrecks. The image of dilapidation and decay sharply captures the human predicament. It is not enough to note that Vrindaban is full of “putrid smell from uncovered drain” (Goswami 108) or that Indira’s hovel, like innumerable others, is “a dark hole” with a “worm-eaten wooden ceiling low enough to touch her head” (Goswami 109). The images of putrefaction aim at a far more serious revelation. The human frame in the “City of God” (which is the title of a crucial section of her autobiography) is severely
damaged. In that city people who present themselves to Indira’s sight are mostly lepers and Radheshyamis (destitute widows who earn their living by singing bhajans). Of the many lepers she sights, one appears thus:

“... a half naked man, lying by a stagnant, open drain. He was more dead than alive. Rather all skin and bones. He was making a desperate effort to raise up his hands. He wanted to say something, or so it appeared to me. A swarm of flies covered his lean body”. (Goswami 113)

The man does not “care even to wave away the big flies that lay in a thick swarm upon him” (Goswami 114). Indira is informed by her teacher-guide Lekharu that she would be seeing “such men ... [who] want to dissolve themselves thus on the sacred soil of Vraj. They ... come from afar to lay their ghosts at Vraj”(Goswami 114). More poignant is the delineation of Radheshyamis:

I came across another destitute Radheshyami, lying prostrate in a dark alley nearby. She was in rags, and was clinging to some odd items picked up from garbage dumps. She looked more like a vulture with broken wings than a human being. (Goswami 119)

The other Radheshyamis around explain that the man with whom this Radheshyami was put up for sometime had been
thrown her out because she had no money with her for her last rites. She is diabetic, with “a swollen leg ... and a host of other ailments” (Goswami 114). She is but one of the many Radheshyamis who in the streets rot away “under the scorching sun and as well as in heavy rains, soaked to the skin” (Goswami 119). The poignancy in the delineation to a great extent derives from the correspondence between the ruined temple and wasted body, both carrying suggestions of a spirit: “What appeared rather surprising to me was that some kind of grace was still left on their person which gave me the impression of a worn-out temple” (Goswami 127-28).¹

Vrindaban, the “City of Gods”, is the correlative of the spirit fastened to the dying body. Hunger and festivities exist in juxtaposition in Indira Goswami’s perception of Vrindaban. The sweet singing of Radheshyamis emanates ironically, from their ruined lives, reminding us of Yeats’ mystic line from “Sailing to Byzantium”:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
The soul claps its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress.

Ruins and dilapidation are homologues of mounds. An Unfinished Autobiography is replete with images of
cemetery and graveyard. The land of Vraj (whose important cities are Mathura and Vrindaban) in Indira Goswami’s self-narration appears to represent (the autobiographer’s and the) human predicament. The lines that Indira chooses to describe the ruin that befell the land of Vraj are from Prabhu Dayal Mittal’s Cultural History of Braja. The accounts of the gruesome destruction brought (on the day of Holi Celebrations) by the Afghan invader Ahmed Shah Abdali.

Everywhere, in the streets, in the alleys and in the marketplace, the headless bodies of all those who were decapitated lay scattered. The city of Mathura was reduced to ashes. Innumerable buildings were razed to the ground. Consequent to that bloodshed, the waters of river Yamuna remained crimson for seven days and nights. Many sanyasins who lived in small cottages on the banks of the river, were also beheaded and their heads were strung together along with the heads of cattle, and were hung for public display. (Quoted in Indira Goswami, 163)

Indira narrows the focus further by including an “eye-witness” account (in Mittal’s book) of the destruction: “Everywhere in Vrindaban, wherever I turned my eyes, I discovered heaps of corpses. It was difficult to walk on
the streets, the corpses gave out such horrid smell that it was difficult to breathe” (quoted in Goswami 163). But the spirit of Vrindaban cannot be destroyed, she asserts: “The city of God had been destroyed time and again, in succession, by Sikander Lodi, Jehangir, Nadir Shah and Ahmed Shah Abdali, but each time, like the city of Jesus ... it rose from its ruins.” (Goswami 163). Vrindaban, repeatedly razed to the ground, has risen up, “like a Phoenix, again and again” (Goswami 162). In its power to resurrect itself, it is very much like its chief inhabitants, the Radheshyamis: “Even the illiterate, ignorant, neglected dregs of humanity, the Radheshyamis ... have accepted life as it is. They have not jumped into the Yamuna. They’ve accepted life with all its pitfalls, all its struggles. I’ve seen their splashes of blood, but never seen them surrender to despair” (Goswami 158-59).

The essential force of An Unfinished Autobiography lies in such assertion of the glory of life in the midst of ruins; in pointing out the strange combination of the decaying body and the indomitable spirit. Indira’s consciousness is through and through permeated by the metaphor of ruins. The very first thing in the Vrindaban cityscape that attracts her attention are the dilapidated structures: “... a number of time-worn buildings ... .
There were some old temples in shambles. Their plaster coatings were worn off; and the red bricks of these structures were visible from a distance ...” (Goswami 130). Moving around in Vrindaban, she had “the impression” she had probably seen “several of these buildings elsewhere too” (Goswami 130), although she cannot recall exactly where—whether at Dwaraka, or in Belur or along the river Kaveri where she had been with her husband. That her consciousness is permeated by the image of ruins is forcefully conveyed to us when she recalls that she had foreseen the ruins of Vrindaban in a dream when she lived with Madhu in the Rann of Kutch and Konwar Ved, which are hundreds of miles away from Vrindaban! “... surprising though it seems, it flashed in my mind ... that once, when I lived with Madhu at the work-sites at the Rann of Kutch and Konvar Ved, I had seen in a strange dream a number of crumbling brick walls” (Goswami 130).

The narrative mentions that some years later the celebrated Punjabi writer Amrita Pritam listened with “close attention” to Indira Goswami’s accounts of “the worn-out buildings of Vrindaban even before visiting the place” (Goswami 130) and “several other supernatural experiences” (Goswami 131).
Indira Goswami’s agony is of a spiritual nature. Certain restlessness in her reveals itself in the thoughts of self-destruction right from her childhood. But in the light of the preceding discussion of ruins-imagery that seems to saturate her mind, her agony conveys itself with greater force.

This agony appears to have its source in her marriage to Madhavan, the Iyengar engineer from Bangalore. Her relationship with him strikes us as being deeper than a formal, marital one. More than a husband, he is her soul-mate. Sushma Chadha in *Evening News* (March 21, 1990) aptly describes *An Unfinished Autobiography* as a work that abundantly reveals the twisting of the soul in unbearable pain ... particularly in the first part ... Throughout the rest of the autobiography is the underlying refrain of this soul-searing experience of the death of one who shared her life and her dreams, who was more of a lover than a husband (Quoted in *Indira Goswami: A Critical Study of Her Writings*, 78).

In less than two years Madhavan dies in an accident. Her relationship with Madhu shows shades of Gopika-Krishna relationship. Before her marriage to Madhavan she had secretly married an Ahom. But that was in a frantic attempt to put an end to her mother’s quest for a match
for her. Madhavan had proposed to her by then (in 1963 when she was 21). She had no inclination to submit herself to her legal husband and the marriage was effective only on paper. Her love was directed to Madhavan. It is with great clarity she realized this:

How is it that I had the least sympathy for the man who had been accepted by me as my husband? For a moment, a strange thought came to my mind. This prince of a young man [that is, her Ahom husband] would be able to do even without me ... but what would happen to Madhavan ... who had offered to marry me? Out of all my lovers, for the first time in my life, I even started imagining a kind of physical bond with him. (Goswami 22)

With remarkable frankness, she says: “Woe is me! Has anyone suffered like me? The marriage was contracted with one man, but love and sympathy were for another! What a dire dilemma!” (Goswami 22) The lines may remind one of Moll Flander’s at the time of her first marriage. Moll reproaches herself for thoughts of her being in her husband’s arms, but with her mind desiring her lover: “I never was in bed with my husband, but I wished myself in the arms of his brother” (Defoe 47). But Indira’s genuine love is for one man: Madhavan. Her relationship with Madhu is sanctified by love. Suicidal tendencies which
were there from her childhood disappear with her marriage to Madhavan. The ‘desert strip’ where she lives with Madhu “loses its barrenness.” (Goswami 24) It is Madhu’s presence that brings in a gradual “realization ... that the justification of life lay not in itself but in our earnest endeavour to live for others” (Goswami 25). She is sensitive to the extreme poverty of labourers who were also deprived of proper medical attention: “A serious disaster involving the lives of six workmen took place, and that also possibly due to the neglect of a management, yet not a slogan was raised. No outcry!” (Goswami 34); “How strange, I thought, once again looking in the direction of the fires. Six labourers were burnt over there, and no reaction at all anywhere! No voices of protest, no uproar, no demonstration!” (Goswami 35) There is an account of Madhavan’s concern for one such suffering man: he carries in his jeep a sick labourer to hospital 30 kuccha miles away. In another episode, he asks Indira to give away all their savings to a heroic driver who is removed from service without notice, and without reason. Madhu, by his conduct not by his words sensitizes her to the suffering of others.

Madhavan’s death drives Indira to a state of unending torment; her agony of separation from lover resembles the yearning of a gopika for Krishna. She is so
much a Viyogini or Virahini constantly meditating on her beloved. Where else can her agony express itself as intensely as in Vrindaban? Whatever is even remotely connected with Madhu induces in her painful yearning.

Indira is specially drawn to the South Indian Rangaji temple (in Vrindaban):

I visited Rangaji Temple several times, and every time I felt I heard Madhu’s voice wherever I stood whether within its sacred precincts near the portal, in the open courtyard adjacent to the flag tower, at the door of the chariot house ... (Goswami 106).

Erected in 1808 by the Ramanuja community to which Madhu belonged, its ways and atmosphere exuded an aroma of the South. There was much similarity between the atmosphere of the temple and that which prevailed in Madhu’s home in Karnataka. (Goswami 196)

She even discovers that the priest resembles Madhu! The whole book is a meditation on the absent/separated beloved. Curiously, Madhavan always keeps the Gita with him, leaving it at the time of ultimate separation from life. Naturally greater meaning should accrue to the verse (attributed to the Persian poet Firdausi) that Mamoni quotes: “Never was Sita’s person seen without
clothes by anybody. Like, the soul that dwells within the
body but, never seen by any” (Goswami 86). It is in
Vrindaban that she “began to consider it to be a kind of
folly to try to discover the image of Ram in every male”
(Goswami 86).

Sita is the concept of “soul that dwells within the
body but, never seen by any.” This concept helps us to
understand her inner conflicts when she is occasionally
drawn to men. For example, she is with her friend Munni
and her unnamed bachelor brother when on a visit to
Mathura. The young man (Munni’s brother) sits by Mamoni’s
side in the tonga. She can “sense a ... manly odour
emanating from his person” (Goswami 141). The episode is
rendered in terms of ruins-imagery. “I felt at certain
moments as if a poem was almost welling up in my heart,
but the next moment, it collapsed like a building long
out of repair. All the time I was sitting by this young
man, my heart was busy, as it were, clearing the debris
of the crumbled structure. (Italics added, Goswami 141).
The evening moon is a seductive presence, as she
continues her narration: “I sat beside Munni’s brother, a
new poem emerged in my heart, like a temple. But as
instantly, it crumbled down and became a heap of rubbish”
(Italics added, Goswami 142). Later in the night the
brother escorts Mamoni to her place: “… We had a jerky
ride. Often the young man’s body touched mine. I had the feeling as if it was Madhu sitting by me, as if I was visiting in his company, the temples on the bank of the Kaveri ...” (Goswami 142). The background is appreciatively one of ruins: “The ruins of the ancient temples, partly covered by the prickly shrubs acquired an air of mystery ... . They stood as silent testimony to the transitoriness of life and things” (Goswami 142). Mamoni’s dilemmas spring from the soul-body coalition:

That day I felt my soul separating itself from the flesh and blood, in which it was (temporarily) lodged. I was not perhaps my true self, but a pretender to the place that possessed this tabernacle of flesh and bones. The pretender is necessarily false. He could not have done anything better than to incinerate this lodging. It can, at best, turn the body into a stinking corpse.

(Goswami 142)

The roots of her agony perhaps run deeper than just the physical separation, (through death) from her husband. The despair and despondency from her childhood, her death wish are perhaps an expression of an intense yearning, a state of her soul.

How else can we understand her deep sense of mortification after she spends a night in a hotel in
Delhi with the handsome, sophisticated engineer Kaikos, a close friend of her late husband? “I began to despise myself so much so that for having spent that night in the hotel with Kaikos, I did not even want to touch the clothes I had then put on, and laid them aside” (Goswami 196). A poisonous evasive snake has for some time been hiding in her hovel, and she even wishes after the Kaikos episode, that it would issue out to bite her!

The soul-body dialectic in the book provides a gloss to Mamoni’s search for holy men:

... the hope lingered in my heart, that someday, somewhere, most likely here in Vraj itself, I would meet some sanyasi coming from the caves of the Himalayas, who would be able to direct my ways in life for the future... . How I yearned to come across some holy man like Gowaria Baba, who sat in meditation with the sceptred ascetics in the caves... . He was the one who could show the way to his devotees in distress. Shall I also be fortunate to come across someone like him? How my heart yearned! (Goswami 146)

On her way to the Institute, during her stay in Vrindaban, she says: “... sometimes, we [i.e., her Ph. D. guide Lekharu and herself] came across holy men and
sanyasins ... Most of those holy men came from the Himalayas” (Goswami 164).

During the initial days of her marital life with Madhu, when he worked on Chenab Bridge Project, Kashmir, Mamoni had set off in to the woods in search of a saint, to ask him about her future. The venture is kept a secret from Madhu. The whole episode appears almost a miniature-rendering of the book. Accompanied by her housemaid and a labourer, she penetrates the forest. All of a sudden, from the thick vegetation darts a woman stark naked; at the same instant two soldiers emerge from behind the trees to run past her in the opposite direction. A dazed Mamoni learns from the maid that she has just sighted a prostitute. Mamoni sketches the physical details about the woman: “Two lumps of flesh hung loose upon her bony chest. They were supposed to be her breasts! Rather a pair of snakes twisting into a coil over a bundle of rickety reeds...” (Goswami 37) (The picture of the shrivelled human frame keeps recurring in Mamoni’s rendering of Radheshyamis in the Vrindaban Section). Groping through the woods, Mamoni finally sights the Muslim saint seated in Padmasana. The questions she puts to the saint contain the core concerns of her life:
1. “I beg to you, please, sir, tell me how it will fare with Madhu”
   “... tell me that Madhu’ll be doing well, that he won’t face any mishap.”

2. “Oh, tell me, sir, that the workmen will fare well and I shall not have to see their pyres ... .”

3. “Assure me that the thought of self-annihilation shall never cross my mind again.” (Goswami 38)

The saint who is lost in meditation is “all skin and bones”; his neck is “shrivelled” and his skin appears to be “rolled into several concentric folds”. He does not deign to open his eyes.

The episode contains, in an embryonic form, general pattern in the whole book. Mamoni keeps seeing Radheshyamis and prostitutes in a wretched state, attempting to manage the barest physical survival (like the prostitute in this episode). And she visits many holy men seeking from them spiritual answers, but without a response from them or without concrete interaction. For instance, she visits, with her Ph.D. Guide Upendra Chandra Lekharu, Deboria Baba. The late Dr. Rajendra Prasad is believed to have met him. “Most of the distinguished politicians of India, elderly prostitutes of Vraj, young widows and abducted Radheshyamis too knelt
before His Holiness in supplication” (Goswami 132). But then she leaves the Baba’s presence without interacting:

My heart was smarting in deep regret for I did not ask the holy man a single thing about my future. ... The one question that was constantly agitating my mind was ... ‘Would my constant remembering of Madhu, which causes anguish in heart, ultimately become a mere memory for which my heart would not bleed?’ But, alas, I could not ask him anything at all. (Goswami 132-33)

Mamoni’s teacher Lekharu feeds her with stories relating to yogis and sanyasis. He takes her to a few holy men such as Lila Baba, Mauni Baba and Hairiyakhani Baba. She is cautious enough to maintain a safe distance from holy men whose intentions are not quite transparent. The “glitter of riches” all around Lila Baba repels her; she can easily see that the Oriya Sadhu, whose blessings Mrs. Lekharu sought, was a cheat; yet her faith in the possible appearance of a genuine sanyasi is ever there. She is continuously fascinated by the sanyasi figures:

I also met at the Kumbhamelas of Benares and Haridwar, some strange sanyasins who came from the Himalayas. They were all ardent ascetics, given to rigorous meditation. They were merciless to themselves in the exertion of their ascetic rites,
treat their bodies of flesh and blood like tatters. The strict austerity of their disposition led me to believe that they would hardly react even if a lump of flesh was torn off from their bodies. (Goswami 178)

Finally, she realizes that there is an actual presence of a holy man in her life, and that is none other than her own teacher and Ph.D. guide Prof. Upendra Chandra Lekharu. He is referred to by residents of Vrindaban as the “sanyasin from Assam”, says Mamoni: “Strangely enough, although I came in contact with many sadhus and other holy men at Vrindaban, it was ultimately in my teacher that my mind sought refuge. I was convinced that the path shown by him was the right one for me” (Goswami 176).

Though it is not explicitly stated, a certain image-pattern hints at a transformation in the teacher’s presence. Before this change, evenings—specifically sunsets—in Mamoni’s narrative are described as being glorious and elevating, but mornings only bringing agitation, to her. A few illustrations should make this clear.

(a) The sunset over the mighty Brahmaputtra is a unique spectacle of splendour. The sparkling wavelets then look like golden fishes. The weary
rays of the retiring sun, lingering upon the rocky bosom of Urvashi, counterfeit the shape of that antique yarn which the soul discards after descending here on earth. Its images, spread all over Urvashi, aroused in my mind, a sense of perplexity which would not be resolved. (Goswami 15)

(b) Madhu took me to Khavda village to show me the unique splendour of the sun setting over the desert. (Goswami 25)

(c) ... the glory of sundown became a part of our daily routine. (Goswami 26)

(d) I was enticed by the evening sun and shadow making the woodland a kaleidoscope of colour. The tall treetops, then aglow with the sun, appeared to me to be sporting skeins of leopard skin. (Goswami 58)

(e) Like the setting sun, impaling through bamboo groves ... lending a semblance of glory to the dull earth ... (Goswami 128)

(f) The last rays of the setting sun imparted a kind of rare grace to the fine ornamental designs of the time-worn gateway arch of the temple, sprinkling it with gold dust, as it were. (Goswami 169)
Mornings, on the other hand, are depressing:

(a) Even at the start of a new day, I was under the grip of that old sense of despondence and pain. At an hour when man is eager to follow the course of the new ray of light, my mind seemed busy counting the number of graves in the graveyard. (Goswami 12)

(b) Every morning after we got up, the first thing for Madhu and me was to look up at the sky. The same sky remained as sullen as ever. (Goswami 47)

(c) Mamoni in the morning collects the ashes of Madhu after the cremation. (Goswami 50)

(d) “It had been raining the whole morning” (Goswami 57).

(e) After getting up from bed early in the morning, I sometimes used to sit fixed at a place for a long time, pondering over my own misfortunes. Tears rolled down my cheeks. (Goswami 125)

(f) One day, early in the morning, I tried to calm my mind ... . I tried to suppress as best as I could, the turmoil of my mind, which had kept me agitated. (Goswami 125)

(g) Waking up before the Suprabhatham of Rangaji temple to her “consternation”, she
recognizes that the poisonous snake living in the premises had fallen on her. (Goswami 168)

Relatedly, Mamoni, after Madhu’s death cannot bear to look at the sky: “I did not have the courage then to look up, literally, to the sky above my head. So I often kept myself indoors” (Goswami 54). A few more examples are provided below:

“I dared not look up at the sky above my head” (Goswami 89), she says at the time of leaving the Sainik School in Delhi.

“After Madhu’s death, I simply could not look up at the sky” (Goswami 123) Such is her helpless utterance—after efforts at looking at the sky, deliberately sitting by the window! She can have only unpleasant and painful feeling by looking at the sky:

It was a variegated sky, which was at times smoky, at others covered with red clouds. Strange to tell, but a thought often struck my mind that the smoky clouds were ... rather fragments of the temples ruined by Sikander Lodi and Aurangzeb. And the dark cloudlets appeared to me to be the broken pieces of the idols. And the red clouds seemed to be the clots of raw blood ... . The same sky sometimes appeared to me like the skin of a deer shot dead,
and the red clouds resembled the streams of blood of the hunted animal. Strange thoughts and ideas filled my mind in those days. Through the window, I saw, now and then, the moon playing hide and seek among the clouds. It was hanging in the sky, like a lump of meat hanging at the butcher’s. (Goswami 123-24)

“How I wished I could again look up at the sky!” (Goswami 138).

But at last one day she manages to look up at the sky. That is when the morning breaks this pattern to display beauty, instead of inducing a sense of desolation in her. Strangely, this change is somehow associated with her teacher, Lekharu whose “wont” it is “to sit at the window, look out at the sky and offer prayers at some fixed time of the day” (Goswami 176). When she accompanies him in the “twilight hour”, she says:

... my mind was enthralled by the unique beauty of the river [Yamuna] ... .

The hues of the sunbeams then became one with the aspect of the time-worn structures. The sun seemed to be floating, in scattered fragments, on the bosom of the Yamuna. The clucking of the pea fowls ... and the chiming of the temple bells to herald the early morning prayers, mingled together to add to the mystery of the hour. My teacher and
I were engrossed by the rare beauty of the city of God at that moment. (Goswami 177)

“Transformation”, surely! A more compelling illustration of the transformation presents itself soon after; when she looks at the sky with admiration:

For a long time after Madhu’s death, I had not the nerve to look up at the sky ... . But on that day, the sky above my head, on the bank of the Yamuna ... had a rare splendour. A soft, reddish glow, much like that of the radiant lips of a youthful girl, pervaded the sky ... . At the touch of the glory radiated by the sky at that moment, all the ugliness and cruelty of the city of the God seemed to evaporate instantly. I fell into a deep contemplation on the grandeur of the sky and transience of life and love. (Goswami 211)

It is the teacher’s voice that brings her out of her “trance” to “reality”.

This does not mean that her restlessness comes to an end. Restlessness and agony are likely to be permanent features of one who is aware of the rupture between soul and body. But there is in the transformation a recollection of the childhood state. She was, in her childhood, greatly attached to her father; the long second section of the book is devoted mainly to her
father and his Diary which moulded her truly noble, aristocratic and human values. That paternal presence is recreated in the company of the teacher, Lekharu:

The weather was fine that day. Memories of the past filled my mind. I felt as if I was riding ... with my father beside me, on the way to our village home. How happy I was! Fully reassured. And absolute freedom from all fear and anxiety! I felt the smell emanating from my teacher’s clothes was like what my father’s clothes emitted. This scent meant warmth and attachment of the heart. (Goswami 180)

The last words of An Unfinished Autobiography speak of Lekharu’s influence upon her:

My teacher inspired me to be neither a famous writer nor an eminent scholar, but an individual endowed with all human qualities. Nothing measures up to humanity. For my teacher, humanity alone was the prime consideration, and nothing else [...] (Goswami 220).
Works Cited


Notes and References

1. A few more examples are cited below to convey the strain of images of dilapidation, ruin and wasting.

- “Many of these historical relics were situated near my place ... . I had immense curiosity about these historical relics ... . I still suffered pangs of constant pain, agony and curiosity about those relics of the bygone times” (Goswami 92).

- “… robustness of his [Navy Commanders] health and body was gone ... . Instead, his head bristled with short, thin, spiky hair” (Goswami 93).

- “Ruins of old temples lay here and there ... . I had read a report that said that remnants of some Buddhist ‘viharas’ (shrines) were discovered” [in Vrindaban] (Goswami 104).

- Sikander Lodi “had all the temples of Mathura razed to the ground ... . The broken pieces of the sacred idols were used as weighing measures” (Goswami 105).

- “A horrible sight of half naked lepers ... came into view” (Goswami 107).

- In Vrindaban Indira notes that Mrs. Lekharu’s “lean body ... was visibly worn out” (Goswami 108) and
once “quite a sturdy figure” Professor Lekharu “was all emaciated” (Goswami 109).

- Indira’s hovel was like “dark cell” (Goswami 111) and the bath room in it was a “hole” and “a narrow, open drain connected ... [it] with another open drain ... much wider. Most of the roads of the city were overflown by sewage, which always emitted a foul smell” (Goswami 110).

- “The stench from the drains made me feel sick” (Goswami 114).

- “Institute of oriental Philosophy, was housed in an ancient building” (Goswami 115).

- Prof. Lekharu’s room in it had “old wooden chair and a table” and a wooden almirah that “looked even more ancient” (Goswami 116).

- Radheshyamis’ “bony bodies” in winter, were “clad in rags, reeled under the cold” and along with the “the clatter of their bones” their “swollen legs” was a common malady to them. (Goswami 122)

2. A few more examples for evenings are provided:

- “… the thorny shrubs with tiny, green leaves .... seemed to lend to the evening setting of yellow hew, a sort of serenity and grace” (Goswami 25).
• “In the evening, ... And every evening, I was agog with an expectation—perchance I would hear Madhu’s voice—the mellifluous, male voice, which I had absorbed into the pores of my being” (Goswami 53-54).

• “And those domes? I saw the setting sun embracing them and raindrops washing the dirt off their surfaces” (Goswami 92).

• “The sun was slowly sinking in the distant sands of the Yamuna. The sky was overcast with clouds of yellow hue. The big ball of fire, called the sun, was about to hide its face in the bosom of the Yamuna after setting the city of God ablaze. It was a delightful evening” (Goswami 169).

• “The bastion was made of red marble, and it took on a rare, reddish glow as the setting sun reflected upon it” (Goswami 179).

• “The radiant sun, about to sink in the bosom of the river, seemed to be in fragments as it was reflected upon the waves” (Goswami 179).

3. More examples could be cited for the descriptions of Mornings and the Sky:

• “But I felt ill-at-ease to do so” (Goswami 58).
• “Every morning, I woke up to find my mind sagging under an acute pain of depression, so much so, that the old obsession of suicide, ... once more started nagging me in the secret recesses of my mind” (Goswami 79).

• “Every morning, I woke up to face a great desolation of spirit. It was beyond me to define” (Goswami 94).

• “A thick layer of darkness in the sky seemed to have been holding from view, a huge ball of fire” (Goswami 219).

• “... towards morning I had a dream. I saw Madhu ... I saw tears rolling down his cheeks” (Goswami 103).

• In the morning, I discovered that I was absolutely alone in the compartment. I felt so lonely” (Goswami 100).

**Sky:**

• “... I did not have the courage yet to look up at the sky” (Goswami 58).

• “I did not have the courage then to look up, literally, to the sky above my head” (Goswami 54).

• “... I could not look up at the sky ...” (Goswami 79).
• “Could I look up at the sky that played hide and seek ... over the river Thames?” (Goswami 80) Also page (Goswami 81, 123-4).

• “... I had not the nerve to look up at the sky above my head!” (Goswami 219).

• “That was the time when I could not look up at the sky above my head, for Madhu was no more” (Goswami 93).

• “Could I lift up my head to have a look at the sky? Not at all...” (Goswami 93).

Among the pioneer writers to dwell on the trauma of the Partition of India, with special focus on women, Amrita Pritam’s name is the foremost. Generally accepted as the first prominent Punjabi poet, novelist, and essayist she has written over hundred books of poetry, fiction, biographies, and essays. Moved immensely by the 18th century Punjabi Sufi poet Waris Shah’s writings, she invokes him through her poem "Ode to Waris Shah". The greatly admired poem gives voice to her anguish over massacres during the Partition of India. Her novel Pinjar in 1950 too focuses on violence against women, loss of humanity during the Partition. In 1947, migrating from Lahore to India Amrita Pritam witnessed the tragic fate of many of her fellow beings.

Daughter of a writer, Amrita married Pritam Singh, son of a hosiery merchant, in 1936 and separated from him later. Her deep love for Sahir Ludhianvi was not responded to. She lived with Imroz for more than four decades. After her divorce, her literary journey that she started as a romantic poet changed its mode and she became part of the Progressive Writer’s Movement and gradually became more clearly feminist. For 33 years she ran and edited a monthly literary magazine, "Nagamani" along with Imroz. Simultaneously she wrote prolifically
In Hindi as well. Later in life Amrita turned to Osho and wrote introductions to several of his books.

In Punjabi Literature Amrita Pritam is the first woman to win the Sahitya Akademi award in 1956. The other awards she has won are Padmashree (1969), Jnanapith Award (1982) and finally, the award Padma Vibhushan (2004). The highest literary award, the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship for life-time achievement comes her way in the same year. D.Litt. degrees from Delhi University (1973), Jabalpur University (1973) and Viswabharity University (1987); Vaptsarov Award from the Republic of Bulgaria (1987) add to the honour she received. She was a nominated member of Rajya Sabha (1986-92). Amrita Pritam’s autobiography Rasidi Ticket (in Punjabi) was published in 1976. Its English translation appeared in 1977.