



# Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F36

**Adapted and modified by  
Kulwant Singh Sandhu**

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# 1. The Travels of a Dervish

By Premchand

## Part 2

### 4

‘Traveller, these prayers rose from the core of Vidyadhari’s heart. I was overjoyed to hear these blessings uttered by her. I was sure that when I returned home this time, I would find my husband standing at the door, smiling and ready to take me in his arms. My heart was thrilled with the thought. I made quick arrangements for returning home and left the site. Eagerness quickened my pace. I walked day and night without fatigue. The hope that a charming face would welcome me at home egged me on. I traversed a month’s distance in a week. When I reached home, my heart sank seeing the condition of my abode of desire. I did not have the courage to step inside. I sat at the threshold and cried copious tears. Not a single servant was in sight and no sign of my cattle. My house was the very picture of desolation. When I stepped in with a heavy heart, I saw my beloved lion lying in the courtyard, tied in heavy chains. He had become so thin that his ribs could be counted. I rushed to hug Sher Singh. The walls and doors wore a deserted look. I realized that our servants had betrayed us. The assets of the family were all gone—expensive gold wares, valuable carpets and other rare objects. My cup of sorrow was full to the brim. The scoundrels had run away with my jewellery box. They must have first chained Sher Singh and then plundered the place at leisure. What an irony! I had gone to seek my dharma and I lost my home in the bargain. For the first time, poverty had shown its ugly face to me.

‘Traveller! After such plunder, my home began to seem like an eyesore to me. This was where Sher Singh and I had enjoyed the springtime of our lives. It was in these bowers that we had frolicked like gazelles; it was here that the heady days of our love were spent. The scenes around here evoked a world of longing. The memories of the past brought tears to my eyes. I could not bear the suffering any more. It was spring. The fragrance of mango buds filled the air. Beneath the mahua tree the earth was covered with pearl-like blossoms and the *dhak* trees had flowered in all their splendour. I bade farewell to my homeland forever.

There was not a single teardrop in my eyes. I turned my face away from the homeland that I always held close to my heart, like a prisoner, just released from jail, turns his face away from it. After a week's journey, I reached the northern part of Srinagar with Sher Singh. We began to spend our days in a solitary spot on the banks of the Indus river. There was a majestic, ancient temple there.

Perhaps, it was once the abode of gods; now it lay in ruins. Gods are immortal but their abodes are subject to the ravages of time. We began to live comfortably amidst those ruins. Slowly, we became attached to the place and the dilapidated, old temple turned into a dharamshala for the passers-by.

'Three years have passed since I came here. It was the rainy season. Dusk had set in; dark, monstrous clouds were floating in the sky frantically. There was a pond at a distance of about two hundred yards from the temple. Shady trees had grown on its banks. I saw a horse rider emerging from the thicket of trees, followed by three or four persons who walked behind him. They walked shoulder to shoulder casting cautious glances around them. It was getting darker. Suddenly, about a dozen armed men appeared from behind the trees and surrounded the horse rider. All his companions took to their heels except one who challenged the armed men with his sword. But what could a single man possibly do? He was shot dead and the attackers disappeared from view in an instant.

'Traveller! I could not bear to watch this heart-rending scene. It was impossible for any human being to remain unmoved by such an incident. Taking God's name I stood up and went towards the pond with a dagger in my hand.

'Rain was pouring in sheets, almost as if it would never rain again. The thunder was clapping so dreadfully at frequent intervals that it seemed as if mountains were colliding with each another. The lightning was so bright that it seemed as if all the light in the world had been accumulated at one place. The darkness was so deep that it seemed as if a thousand nights of *amavas* had come together.

Gathering courage, I waded through waist-deep water and finally reached the other end of the pond. There I saw rays of light coming from a cave. I went close and peered into it to see a huge bonfire burning. Several men stood around the fire. A couple of steps away from the fire a fiery-eyed woman glared around her and shouted, "I'll burn him with my husband and reduce him to ashes." My curiosity was ignited by this scene. I held my breath and watched this scene with amazement. Before the woman lay a blood-spattered corpse, and a man sat close to it, bound with ropes and his head bent low. I could guess that this man was the horse rider who was ambushed upon, the dead man was the chief of the attackers and the woman, his wife. Her hair was dishevelled and her face and her eyes spewed fire. Our painters have often drawn anger as masculine but I think a woman's anger is far more violent and destructive. An enraged woman is like a raging lioness. A woman's vengeance can singe the entire world. This goddess of grace, this image of tenderness and patience turns into a demoniacal figure when enraged. Only a woman can consider the act of vengeance a sacred duty, and can show a single-mindedness in it akin to devotion.

'Gnashing her teeth, the woman repeated, "I'll burn you to ashes along with my husband. All his wealth cannot douse the fire of my revenge." Saying this, she pulled the trussed man and pushed him into the burning pyre. It was a hideous spectacle! Only a woman can go to this extent in wreaking her vengeance. My blood boiled. I pulled out my dagger and leapt towards the fire. The dacoits ran away from the scene. Then I fearlessly rushed into the fire and pulled out the luckless fellow from the jaws of the fire. Only his clothes were singed. Just as a snake hisses threateningly when its prey is snatched away, the flames hissed and chased me. But I had managed to escape their clutches. It seemed as though even the fire thirsted for that man's blood.

'By now the dacoit had rallied again and the dead chief's wife pounced on me like a demon. It seemed that they would rip me to pieces. Just at that moment a thunderous roar was heard at the mouth of the cave. Sher Singh, his eyes blazing, entered the scene. Just as Murlidhar had protected Draupadi's honour before an assembly, Sher Singh saved my life in the same way. Looking at his face, the robbers ran for their lives. Only the wife of the chief stood transfixed at the spot like a dazed woman. Suddenly, she lifted her husband's corpse and jumped into the funeral pyre. I wished to rescue her but then, who could stop the pyre from burning a sati? Before my eyes that image of vengeance merged with the flames. Then I turned to look closely at the trussed up man and my heart gave a leap. He was Pandit

Sridhar. The same features, the same dress and the same air of confidence! He lowered his head at my sight and began to weep. As I was asking him about his well-being, a young man in a soldier's habit appeared there. I instantly recognized her. She was Vidyadhari; the male attire looked good on her. Our eyes met. Her pale face reflected her sense of embarrassment.

She could not utter a word, but her eyes conveyed a world of emotions.'

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'Traveller! It was difficult for me to stay there any longer as robbers with guns were looking for Sher Singh. One day I left the place and passed through mountains and wilderness to reach here. I liked this place so much that I began to live in this cave. It has been three years since I had first set foot here. It was the same season even then. I had gone to the Gyan Sagar to draw water when, all of a sudden, I saw a young man riding a beautiful horse, an Arabian musk, approaching. He held a shining spear in his hand. When he saw Sher Singh he stopped in his tracks and then decided to attack him. Sher Singh was in a fury and roared so loudly that fishes leapt from the waters of the lake. He pulled the young man down from the horse and placed his paws on the man's chest. All this happened in a matter of a moment. I dropped my pitcher and ran towards him and pleaded with Sher Singh to spare the man's life. The youth was wounded in the chest. I took him to the cave and was busy nursing him. I cleaned his wound at regular intervals and dressed it. One day, I had to go to the village to buy some essentials. But all the shops were closed and the bazaar looked totally desolate. A sense of melancholy had enveloped everything. Curious, I wandered about aimlessly but not a single human being was to be seen to ask what the matter was. It seemed as if I had arrived at a cemetery. I was thinking of returning home when I heard the sound of horses' hooves. A few moments later, I saw a woman covered in black from head to toe, coming towards me. She rode a black horse. Behind her were several guards and soldiers wearing black uniforms. In the death-like silence that reigned all around, this mournful procession looked rather ominous. Suddenly, the gaze of the female horse rider fell on me. Immediately she dug her heels into the horse and, coming close to me, asked in a peremptory tone, "Who are you?" I fearlessly replied. "I'm a traveller, come to this bazaar to buy some stuff, but not a soul could be seen in the market."

‘The woman looked behind her and made some gestures. Immediately two horse riders came forward and captured me and led me away. No one spoke a word; I also could not muster the courage to speak. I could, however, guess from their demeanour that she was the queen of this place. I had no idea why I had been captured and what punishment would I be given. I didn’t know how long it would take me to return home. Sher Singh would be worried. It was time for his meal but who would feed him? It was a strange predicament that I had got myself into. No one knew what was in my fate. I was an unfortunate woman for whom there was no peace anywhere. Lost in these worrying thoughts, I walked with the horsemen for half an hour when the loud noise of a gunshot startled me. I lifted my eyes to see a royal palace on top of a high hill. To climb up there were broad steps made of rough-hewn stones. The mournful procession wound its way up. There were hundreds of dervishes up there. All of them were wearing black robes. The room I was kept in was quite close to the palace. Its floor was made of white marble. The only creature comfort in the room was a mat to sit upon. I sat on the floor and began to curse my fate. Then the queen appeared in her regalia. She was wearing a silk sari and had a bright face even though she must have been above fifty. She sat on the mat. I stood up to pay my respects, kissed her feet and folded my hands before her.’

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‘Traveller! The way the queen talked was very arresting. In the beginning her demeanour had frightened me. But just as hard sandalwood conceals delicate fragrance, her words concealed a gentle heart. Just a few days ago, her beloved son, the Rajkumar, the great hope of all the subjects, had left the world in the prime of his youth. The entire population was mourning his loss, wearing black and the whole town looked desolate. A royal proclamation had been announced to the effect that if the sound of music emanated from any house it would be destroyed, and any garden where a recently bloomed flower was seen would meet a similar fate. I had been made prisoner because I had not worn the black clothes of mourning. The queen began to weep bitterly in the midst of the conversation. Seeing her tears my eyes also brimmed over. A painful tale acts as a balm to broken hearts. While we were still crying, she suddenly stood up and asked in a tone of amazement, “Are you a woman?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Do you live beside the Gyan Sagar?”

“I do.”

“Since when?”

“Two weeks.”

“Have you seen my  
prince?”

“Yes, I have.”

“When?”

“The day he went hunting lions and a lion assaulted him.”

‘The queen’s eyes clouded over and she asked, “Do you have any idea where his corpse could be? I have proclaimed that I’ll give away half my kingdom to anyone who can tell me where to find his body.”

“I’ll find it  
out.”

“The  
corpse?”

“No. The prince himself.”

“Is my Randhir alive?”

“Yes.”

‘The queen fell at my feet. On the third day of her visit, Arjun Nagar seemed to have been transformed. Gentle music floated in the air and every object seemed to be in a joyful mood. Shops wore garlands and evening soirees were held in the market place. The black of mourning was replaced by the rejuvenating hues of saffron. As the sun rose from the east, gun salutes reverberated from the ramparts of the city. I rode a green broke horse at the head of a procession, followed by the prince in a bejewelled elephant that ambled along. Women stood in balconies and sang welcome songs while showering flowers on the procession. The queen stood at the entrance to the palace, holding diamonds and other precious stones in the



*pallu* of her sari. As the prince got down from the elephant, she rushed to him and gave him a tight hug. Tragically, this proved to be her final expression of maternal love. When she got her precious son back who she had given up for lost, she reached such a height of ecstasy that she passed away. A mother's love is the most pure, the most selfless and the loftiest of all love. Romantic love is mixed with human considerations while maternal love is divine; one caters to biological instincts, the other is heavenly bliss.'

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'Traveller! The queen had given away half the kingdom to me and the prince adhered to this promise. At that stage of my life I didn't crave for pelf or power, gold or silver. All such desires had long been buried. However, I took upon myself the responsibility of a ruler thinking that wealth would enable me to do some good for the people. Two years have passed since then but the thought of leading a life of comfort and luxury has not even occurred to me. I haven't slept on a couch or enjoyed the pleasures of music. I haven't eaten anything other than coarse food. A woman who loses her husband leads an austere life. She doesn't bother about her own comforts. We, the women of India, are the daughters of Gandhari whose loyalty to her husband will ever remain alive in the pages of world history. India's soil has given birth to Sita and Savitri; it has nurtured devis like Sati and Damyanti. But Gandhari is superior to them all. Her loyalty to her husband is unparalleled and immortal. She didn't cast her gaze on the attractions of the world simply because nature had not endowed her husband with the capacity to do so. Many Sitas and Savitris will emerge from this soil. However, there is only one Gandhari, and there will be none like her. There are several grand mansions, lush green orchards, carpets of intricate design and rare objects under my possession.

'But these mansions are empty and the orchard is bare. I don't have the urge even to look at them. Apart from spending time at the feet of my husband, I have no other desire. I travel to Arjun Nagar every morning and return after discharging important duties of the state. The servants have been strictly forbidden to intrude upon my privacy. The entire income of the state is spent on the welfare of my people; I do not use even one cowrie for my personal expenses. You'd be happy to see how I manage the affairs of the state if you had the time. I've had twenty big ponds dug and have forty cowsheds built in the past two years. I plan to have as many waterways in my

state as there are veins in a human body. I have appointed a hundred and fifty vaidyas, doctors of indigenous medicine, to tour the villages and treat people who are sick. Every village has arrangements for cleanliness. Even small hamlets have adequate arrangements for lighting. God gives light during the day; it is the duty of the state to provide for it during the nights. I have handed over the entire management of the state to Pandit Sridhar. The very first thing I did was to find him and give him this responsibility. I did not do this to flatter him. In fact, in my knowledge, there was no one as trustworthy, as responsible, as well intentioned and as virtuous as he. I have full confidence that he'll carry out these responsibilities competently till the end of his life. Vidyadhari, too, is with him. She is still the very image of kindness and contentment, goodness and purity, as before. Her devotion to her husband is still as deep and infinite as the Gyan Sagar. She is no longer as beautiful as before, her manners have lost much of their charm. Her face looks weary like a wilted flower and worries have left their mark on her face. Despite all this, she looks like a queen and her features are still attractive. Her simplicity scores over artificial make-up. At times we meet but exchange no words. She cannot look me in the eye. She is overwhelmed by a sense of embarrassment whenever she sees me and her face shows that she is deeply regretful. I would like to say in all honesty that I hold no grudge against Vidyadhari. My regard and love for her grows by the day. Whenever I see her, I feel like kissing her feet. It's always auspicious to see a pativrata. But I hold myself back thinking that she might consider it to be flattery. I have just one prayer to God now—that I remain at my husband's feet and my devotion to him increases day by day. May my head lie at his feet when I depart from this world. Let the last words coming from my mouth be—God, let me be his slave even in my next birth.'

## 2. Grammar Page

### The Past Continuous Tense

#### Structures:

**Affirmative:** *sub + was/were + v<sup>d</sup> + obj*

**Negative:** *sub + was/were + not + v<sup>d</sup> + obj*

**Questions:** *Was/were + sub + v<sup>d</sup> + obj + ?*

*WH + was/were + sub + v<sup>d</sup> + obj + ?*

**Active:** *sub + was/were + v<sup>d</sup> + obj*

**Passive:** *obj + was/were + being + v<sup>3</sup> + by + sub*

He was writing a letter.

He was not writing a letter.

Was he writing a letter?

Why was he writing a letter?

He was writing a letter.

A letter was being written by him

#### Uses:

*We use the past continuous tense to talk about:*

➤ *what was happening at a particular time in the past.*

This time yesterday, I was reading a book.

Yesterday at this time, I was sitting in the park.

What were you doing when the door bell rang?

This time last week we were visiting Pokhara.

We were jogging when we heard the news of the royal massacre.

We were watching TV at 3 o'clock yesterday.

➤ *descriptions and background to an event in the past.*

When he got home, his sister was watching television.

I was eating dinner when there was a knock on the door.

The man was sitting on the bench. He was wearing a blue suit. He was reading a paper and eating biscuits.

The woman was in the kitchen. She was wearing an evening dress. Her son was sitting at a table and she was serving food.

When I walked into the park, several people were sitting there, some were talking on the phones, an old man was reading a novel, and some children were flying kites.

One fat lady was waving her hands.

➤ *interrupted actions in the past.*

I was watching TV when she called.

When the phone rang, she was writing a letter.

While we were having the picnic, it started to rain.

What were you doing when the earthquake started?

While Mr. Chaudhary was sleeping last night, someone stole his car.

Shyam was waiting for us when we got off the plane.

While I was writing the email, the computer suddenly went off.

The telephone rang just as the meal was being served.

I was just joking when I said that.

When I arrived at the park, Milan was sitting on the bench with a paper.

➤ *two actions in the same sentence that expresses the idea that both actions were happening at the same time. The actions are parallel.*

While I was reading, she was watching television.

Were you listening while he was talking?

I wasn't paying attention while I was writing the essay.

What were you doing while you were waiting?