



Learn English Through Stories

E Series

E62

**Adapted and modified by
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An Indian Dream - Adapted

By M J Akbar

Ashfaq Hussain was a young Muslim man, easily noticed in the busy streets of Kolkata. You could spot him in a small, affordable café called the Diamond Restaurant, sitting at a corner table, sometimes with a cup of tea, sometimes just gazing into a mirror. He liked to check his wavy hair, combing it carefully with the red comb he kept in his pocket. With a cigarette in hand, he would glance at his reflection, admiring his handsome face. Before leaving, he always smiled kindly at the young boy cleaning the tables and shared a friendly word with the café owner at the cash register. Ashfaq often squinted his eyes during conversations, looking thoughtful, especially if he thought someone was watching. But his heart sank because no girls ever seemed to notice him. In India, young women rarely made eye contact with strangers, except perhaps at family weddings.

Ashfaq spent much of his time at the Diamond Restaurant with his friends Kader, Salim, and Ajoy. They had graduated a year ago from Maulana Azad College, just a short walk from the café. Their three years at college were split between the college canteen and the Diamond, where they talked, laughed, and dreamed. Recently, Ashfaq paid more attention to his appearance, especially his wavy hair. The reason was simple: he had fallen in love with a girl named Ayesha.

It all began at a wedding, a grand event that brought together family, friends, and distant relatives. Indian weddings were lively, filled with music, food, and chatter. They were also places where new relationships could start, and old disputes could resurface. Elders watched young people closely, noting who might make a good husband or wife. Amid the chaos, young men and women sometimes brushed past each other, sparking feelings of excitement. At this wedding, Ashfaq saw Ayesha. Her silk dress flowed beautifully, and her eyes sparkled. When their hands touched briefly while passing food, Ashfaq felt his heart race. He learned her name: Ayesha. He whispered it to himself, savoring the sound.

Back at the Diamond, Ashfaq couldn't stop talking about her. "She's perfect," he said, his eyes shining. His friends teased him. "Why don't you visit Lily on Free School Street?" Salim joked. "Maybe that will cure your obsession!" Lily was a woman known for entertaining men, and the idea made everyone laugh. "Shut up, Salim!" Ajoy said, grinning. "Ashfaq's love is pure. It's worth more than money."

“Idiots,” Ashfaq muttered, but he smiled. The conversation soon shifted to their usual topics: love, money, football, and dreams of changing the world. But Ashfaq’s thoughts stayed with Ayesha. He learned she came from a wealthy family. Her father owned a popular kabab restaurant, and she studied at Loreto College, an elite school on Park Street. Ashfaq started eating at her father’s restaurant, hoping to see her. He also adjusted his daily routine to walk down Park Street at 3:30 p.m., when Ayesha left college. But every day, at exactly 3:20, a shiny blue car arrived to pick her up. Ayesha, laughing with her friends, would climb in and disappear, unaware of Ashfaq’s longing.

For two months, Ashfaq followed this routine, but it led nowhere. He wanted to talk to her, but how? He had studied in an Urdu-medium school and earned a degree in Urdu literature. Ayesha, only eighteen, spoke perfect English with a beautiful accent, shaped by her convent school and college. The gap between them felt huge. Ashfaq began to hate his life: the cramped rooms in Tantibagan where he lived, the dirty bathroom, the cheap picture of Pandit Nehru on the wall, his three worn shirts, and the thin curtains at his windows. His sister cleaned the floor with muddy water every morning, while his mother cooked in a small, smoky kitchen using a chulha, a traditional mud stove. Ashfaq dreamed of a better life: a job, a nice apartment, a sofa, and Ayesha by his side.

Determined to change his future, Ashfaq started looking for work. He had been sending job applications since graduating, but now he checked the post office daily for replies. He imagined getting a good job, renting a flat, marrying Ayesha, and living happily ever after.

One Friday, a letter arrived. A big company invited him for a test and interview for a Management Trainee position. Ashfaq was thrilled. That afternoon, he even went to pray at the mosque, something he hadn’t done in years. He asked for God’s help to get the job.

On Tuesday, he wore a new blue tie with black patterns, bought specially for the occasion. He arrived early at the company’s office on Brabourne Road, feeling nervous but hopeful. The interviewer, Mr. Mirchandani, said casually, “We received over 20,000 applications from across India.” Someone asked, “How many will you hire?” Mr. Mirchandani smiled. “As many as we need.”

Ashfaq took the test quietly. He felt confident in his intelligence but worried about his English. The other candidates spoke fluently, with polished accents. When Mr. Mirchandani announced the results, only three candidates were selected for the next round—all with excellent English. Ashfaq’s name wasn’t called. He left the building, feeling humiliated, forcing a weak smile as he said goodbye to the others.

After several failed interviews, Ashfaq realized a painful truth. In India, being from a lower-middle-class family and average in skills wasn't enough. To succeed, you needed connections, a degree in a high-demand field like economics, or a perfect English accent. Ashfaq lowered his expectations, applying for simpler jobs like clerk or salesman. He told himself there was still a chance for promotions and a better future.

At home, his sisters teased him about his obsession with Ayesha, so he stayed out late to avoid them. He became short-tempered with his mother, showing little respect except for the food she cooked. His dreams of Ayesha grew vague. He couldn't recall her face clearly, only words like "beautiful" and "perfect." One rainy afternoon at the Diamond, Ajoy asked, "What does Ayesha look like?"

Ashfaq couldn't answer. That night, he lay awake, smoking cigarettes and wondering what he was truly in love with. Was it Ayesha, or the idea of her? His mind, shaped by traditional values, struggled with these thoughts. In the morning, he decided he was still in love with her, even if she was just a dream.

His desire for a job grew stronger. A distant relative, tired of Ashfaq's requests, told him about a clerk position in a suburban municipality. Ashfaq had good qualifications: a degree, leadership in a local youth club, and recommendations from a Muslim official and two college professors. The municipality had a Muslim chairman, which gave him hope.

The interview took place in a damp, gloomy office. The chairman, wearing thick glasses, sat at a long table, looking important. Two other men were there: one with a bald head, the other a young commissioner in a faded tie. Ashfaq felt nervous but prepared. However, the job went to another candidate, supported by a powerful man named Shyam Babu, who controlled many votes in the chairman's election. Ashfaq's hopes were crushed again.

That day, he didn't see Ayesha. She must have left college early. Feeling lost, he wandered down Park Street, staring at expensive magazines he couldn't afford. At the corner of Park Street and Chowringhee, he saw a large statue of Mahatma Gandhi, standing tall in a wealthy area full of fancy restaurants. It felt ironic. Gandhi stood for simplicity, yet here he was, surrounded by luxury and hidden wealth. Ashfaq thought about the poor, who had only religion and hunger, while the rich had everything.

Something broke inside him. A sudden, silent realization hit: nothing mattered anymore—not his mother, not Gandhi, not love, not money. Everything he believed in seemed like an illusion. For a moment, he felt free, but the feeling didn't last. Confusion returned, and he drank three cups of tea at the Diamond, lost in thought. He wondered if he could become a revolutionary, like Ajoy talked about, fighting for change in villages. But deep down, he knew he wasn't that person. He still wanted the sofa, the nice life.

Desperate, Ashfaq made a bold decision. He went to see Lily, the woman his friends had joked about. He used money—possibly borrowed or stolen—to book a room in a fancy hotel. The room was a dream: air-conditioned, quiet, with thick carpets and heavy curtains. Ashfaq felt like he was in a different world. He ordered a drink, trying to act confident despite his nervousness. Lily was kind, helping him relax. She scrubbed his back in the warm bathtub, and he felt cleaner than ever before.

That evening, he wore his new tie and went to the hotel restaurant. The music was loud, and couples danced gracefully. The food was delicious, unlike anything he had tasted. For the first time, Ashfaq felt truly alive, surrounded by luxury. He laughed loudly, surprising Lily and the waiters. "Stop it!" Lily whispered, embarrassed. Ashfaq calmed down, not wanting to ruin the night. He felt happy, as if he had found an answer: forget everything and just live.

Lying on the soft hotel bed, Ashfaq thought of Ayesha one last time. The memory was sweet but distant, like a story from another life. He realized his love for her had been a beautiful dream, even if it was foolish.

The next morning, January 21, Ashfaq took his own life in the hotel room. The news caused a small stir. Lily was frightened, worried she might be blamed. The hotel management was upset about the bad publicity and fired the clerk who had checked Ashfaq in. The clerk, with a family to support, now faced a difficult future. Ashfaq's parents were devastated, mourning the loss of their son. At the Diamond, his friends grew distant. Ajoy called Ashfaq weak, but Salim and Kader told him to be quiet, angry at his harsh words.

In time, Ayesha married a wealthy businessman who spoke excellent English and danced well. She moved on with her life, unaware of the young man who had loved her from afar.

Comprehension Questions and Answers

Question 1: Where does Ashfaq often spend his time with his friends?

Question 2: Why does Ashfaq pay more attention to his hair recently?

Question 3: Where does Ashfaq meet Ayesha for the first time?

Question 4: What does Ayesha's father own?

Question 5: Why does Ashfaq walk down Park Street at 3:30 p.m. every day?

Question 6: What job does Ashfaq apply for at a big company?

Question 7: Why doesn't Ashfaq get the Management Trainee job?

Question 8: What does Ashfaq hate about his home in Tantibagan?

Question 9: Who gets the clerk job at the municipality instead of Ashfaq?

Question 10: What happens to Ashfaq at the end of the story?

Answers

Answer 1: At the Diamond Restaurant.

Answer 2: Because he is in love with Ayesha.

Answer 3: At a wedding.

Answer 4: A kabab restaurant.

Answer 5: To see Ayesha when she leaves Loreto College.

Answer 6: Management Trainee.

Answer 7: His English is not as good as the other candidates'.

Answer 8: The cramped rooms, dirty bathroom, and smoky kitchen.

Answer 9: Shyam Babu's candidate.

Answer 10: He takes his own life in a hotel room.

3. Grammar Page

Conjunctions That Join Sentences

Conjunctions are also used to **join two sentences** to make them one. Here are some examples with **and**, **but** and **or**.

Mom is working in the garden. Dad is busy in the kitchen.
Mom is working in the garden **and** Dad is busy in the kitchen.

Sam is playing football. Eric is reading a book.
Sam is playing football **and** Eric is reading a book.

I switched on the TV. There were no interesting programs on.
I switched on the TV, **but** there were no interesting programs on.

Meera phoned her friend Anna. She wasn't at home.
Meera phoned her friend Anna, **but** she wasn't at home.

Would you like to go to the movies? Shall we go for a burger?
Would you like to go to the movies **or** shall we go for a burger?

Hurry up! You'll be late for school.
Hurry up **or** you'll be late for school!

Notes

A long sentence with two parts that are linked by **and**, **but** or **or** is called a **compound sentence**.

Other Words for *and*

There are other words for **and** that also join two sentences.

Dad washed the car. He polished it.
Dad **not only** washed the car, **but he also** polished it.

Sally baked the cake. She decorated it.
Sally **not only** baked the cake, **but** she decorated it **as well**.

John did his homework. He cleaned his room.
John **not only** did his homework, **but** he cleaned his room, too.

They visited Sydney. They also visited Hong Kong and Tokyo.
They visited Sydney, **as well as** Hong Kong **and** Tokyo.

Sam ran faster than Kim. He ran faster than David too.
Sam ran faster than **both** Kim **and** David.