



# Learn English Through Stories

F Series

F59

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## 1. Exercise-book

As soon as she learnt to write, Uma caused tremendous trouble. She would write 'Rain patters, leaves flutter' on every wall of the house with a piece of coal – in great, childish, curving letters. She found the copy of *The Secret Adventures of Haridas* that her elder brother's wife kept beneath her pillow and wrote in pencil, 'Black water, red flower'. Most of the stars and planets in the new almanac that everyone in the house used were, so to speak, eclipsed by her huge scribbles. In her father's daily account-book, in the middle of his calculations, she wrote:

He who learns to write Drives a horse and cart.

Up to now she had not been interrupted in these literary endeavours; but at last she met with a dire mishap.

Uma's elder brother Gobindalal had a very benign look about him, but he wrote perpetually for the newspapers. None of his friends or relatives supposed from his conversation that he was a thinker, and indeed one could not justly accuse him of thinking on any subject. Nevertheless he wrote – and his opinions were in tune with most readers in Bengal. He had recently, for example, completed an elegant essay demolishing – by the spirit of his attack and the exuberance of his language rather than by logic – some gravely false ideas about anatomy that were current in European science.

In the quiet of the afternoon, Uma took her brother's pen and ink and wrote on the essay in bold letters:

So well-behaved is young Gopal Whatever you give he eats it all.

I don't believe she meant this to be a dig at the readers of Gobindalal's essay, but he was beside himself with rage. First he smacked Uma; then he took away her pencil-stub, her ink-smeared blunted pen and all her other carefully accumulated writing implements. The little girl, quite unable to understand the reason for such disgrace, sat in a corner and cried her heart out.

When her punishment was finished, Gobindalal softened a little. He returned the confiscated items, and tried to dispel the little girl's distress by giving her a well-bound, nicely ruled exercise-book.

Uma was seven years old at the time. From then on, this exercise-book was under her pillow every night, and in her lap or under her arm all day long. When with her hair plaited Uma was taken along by the maid to the girls' school in the village, the exercise-book went too. Some of the girls were intrigued by the book, some coveted it, and some begrudged her it.

In the first year that she had the exercise-book, she neatly wrote in it: 'Birds are singing, Night is ending.' She would sit on the floor of her bedroom embracing the exercise-book, chanting out loud and writing.

She accumulated many snatches of prose and rhyme in this way.

In the second year, she wrote some things of her own: very short but very much to the point: no introduction or conclusion. For example, at the end of 'The Tiger and the Crane' – a story in *kathāmālā* – a line was added which is not to be found in that book or anywhere else in Bengali literature. It was this: 'I love Yashi very much.'

Let no one suppose that I am about to concoct a love-story! Yashi was not an eleven-or twelve-year-old local boy: she was an old house-servant, whose actual name was Yashoda. But this one sentence should not be taken as firm proof of Uma's feelings towards her. Anyone wanting to write an honest account of the matter would find that the sentence was fully contradicted two pages later in the exercise-book.

This was not just a stray example: there were blatant contradictions in Uma's writings at every step. In one place one could read of her life-long rift with Hari (not Hari meaning Krishna, but a girl at school called Haridashi). But something a few lines below suggested there was no one in the world whom she loved more than Hari.

The next year, when Uma was nine years old, a *sānāi* began to play one morning. It was her wedding-day. The groom was called Pyarimohan, one of Gobindalal's fellow-writers. Although he was still quite young and had acquired some education, modern ideas had not penetrated him at all. He was therefore the darling of the neighbourhood. Gobindalal adopted him as a model, though not with complete success.

Dressed in a Benares sari, her little face covered with a veil, Uma left tearfully for her father-in-law's house. Her mother said, 'Do what your mother-in-law tells you, my dear. Do the housework, don't spend your time reading and writing.' And Gobindalal said, 'Mind that you don't go scratching on walls; it's not that sort of house. And make sure you don't scrawl on any of Pyarimohan's writings.'

Uma's heart trembled. She realized there would be no mercy in the house where she was going; she would have to learn after endless scoldings what things were regarded there as mistakes and faults.

The *sānāi* sounded on that day too, but I doubt if anyone in that crowd of wedding-guests really understood what the girl felt in her trembling heart, behind her veil, Benares sari and ornaments.

Yashi went along with Uma. She was supposed to settle her into her in-laws' house, then leave her there. The tender-hearted Yashi, after much reflection, took Uma's exercise-book along too. The book was a piece of her parental home: a much-loved memento of her short residence in the house of her birth; a brief record of parental affection, written in round childish letters. It gave her, in the midst of domestic duties that had come too early, a taste of the cherished freedom that is a young girl's due.

For the first few days that she was in her in-laws' house she did not write anything – she had no time. But the time came for Yashi to return; and on the day that she left, Uma shut the door of her bedroom at midday, took her exercise-book out of her tin box, and tearfully wrote: 'Yashi has gone home, I shall go back to Mother too.'

Nowadays she had no leisure in which to copy out passages from *Easy Reader* or *The Dawn of Understanding*; maybe she had no inclination either. So there were no long passages dividing her own childish writings. Below the sentence mentioned above was written: 'If only *Dādā* could take me home again, I would never spoil his writings again.'

Word had it that Uma's father sometimes tried to invite her home for a bit; but Gobindalal and Pyarimohan joined forces to prevent this. Gobindalal said that now was the time to learn her duties towards her husband: bringing her back to the old atmosphere of affection would disturb her quite unnecessarily. He wrote such a shrewd and witty essay on the subject, that his like-minded readers could not but agree. Uma got wind of what was happening, and wrote in her exercise-book: '*Dādā*, I beg you, take me home again just once – I promise not to annoy you.'

One day she was in her room with the door closed, writing something similarly pointless. Her sister-in-law Tilakmanjari, who was very inquisitive, decided she must find out what Uma got up to behind her closed door. When she peeped through a crack and saw her writing, she was amazed: the Goddess of Learning had never before made so secret a visitation to the female quarters of the house. Her younger sister Kanakmanjari came and peeped too; and her youngest sister Anangamanjari – precariously standing on tiptoe to peer at the mysteries within.

Uma, as she wrote, suddenly heard three familiar voices giggling outside the room. Realizing what was afoot, she hastily shut the exercise-book in her box and buried her face in the bedclothes.

Pyarimohan was most perturbed when he was told about what had been seen. Reading and writing, once started, would lead to play-and novel-writing, and household norms would be endangered. As he thought further about the matter, he worked out a most subtle theory. Perfect marriage was produced by a combination of female and male power. But if through women's education female power was weakened, then male power would prevail unchecked; and the clash between male and male would be so destructive that marriage would be annihilated, and women would be widowed. As yet, no one had been able to challenge this theory.

That evening Pyarimohan came to Uma's room and gave her a thorough scolding, and ridiculed her too, saying: 'So the wife wants to go to an office with a pen behind her ear? We'll have to get her a *śāmlā*!' Uma could not understand what he meant. She had never read his articles, so she hadn't learnt to appreciate his wit. But she was deeply humiliated, and wished that the earth would swallow her up.

For a long time after she wrote nothing. But one autumn morning she heard a beggar-woman singing an *āgamanī* song. She listened quietly, resting her chin on the bars of the window. The autumn sunshine brought back so many memories of childhood; hearing an *āgamanī* song as well was too much to bear.

Uma could not sing; but ever since she learnt how to write, her habit had been to write down songs, to make up for not being able to sing them. This was what the beggar-woman sang that day:

The citizens say to Uma's mother, 'Your lost star has returned.'

The Queen runs, madly weeping, 'Where is Uma, tell me?

My Uma has returned – Come, my darling,

Let me clasp you to me!' Stretching her arms, Hugging her mother's neck,

Uma chides her, sore at heart:

'Why did you not send for me?'

With the same soreness of heart, Uma's eyes filled with tears. She furtively called the singer over and, shutting the door of her room, began to make a strangely spelt copy of the song in her exercise-book.

Tilakmanjari, Kanakmanjari and Anangamanjari saw this through the crack in the door and shouted out, clapping their hands: '*Baudidi*, we've seen everything, *Baudidi*!' Uma opened the door and said in great distress, 'Dear sisters, don't tell anyone, please, I beg you. I won't do it again, I won't write again.' Then she saw that Tilakmanjari had her eye on the exercise-book. She ran over to it and clasped it to her breast. Her sisters-in-law struggled to snatch it from her; failing to do so, Ananga called her brother.

Pyarimohan came and sat down on the bed sternly. 'Give me that book,' he thundered. When his command was not obeyed, he growled in an even deeper voice, 'Give it to me.'

The girl held the exercise-book to her breast and looked at her husband, entreating him with her gaze. When she saw that Pyarimohan was about to force it from her, she hurled it down, covered her face with her hands, and fell to the floor.

Pyarimohan picked up the exercise-book and loudly read out from her childish writings. As she listened, Uma tried to clutch the nethermost depths of the earth. The other girls collapsed into peals of laughter.

Uma never got the exercise-book back again. Pyarimohan also had an exercise-book full of various subtly barbed essays, but no one was philanthropic enough to snatch *his* book away and destroy it.

## 2. Comprehension Questions and Answers

Question 1: What does Uma use to write on the walls of her house at the beginning of the story?

Question 2: Why does Gobindalal punish Uma, and what does he give her afterward?

Question 3: How old is Uma when she gets married, and who is her husband?

Question 4: What does Uma write in her exercise-book on the day Yashi leaves her in-laws' house?

Question 5: What happens to Uma's exercise-book at the end of the story?

### Answers

Answer 1: Uma uses a piece of coal to write on the walls.

Answer 2: Gobindalal punishes Uma for writing on his essay, smacking her and taking her writing tools. He later gives her a well-bound, nicely ruled exercise-book.

Answer 3: Uma is nine years old when she marries Pyarimohan, one of Gobindalal's fellow writers.

Answer: Uma writes, "Yashi has gone home, I shall go back to Mother too," and later, "If only Dādā could take me home again, I would never spoil his writings again."

Answer 5: Pyarimohan confiscates Uma's exercise-book after reading her writings aloud and mocking her, and she never gets it back.

### 3. Grammar Page



#### GRAMMAR STUDY: Prepositions Used in Idioms and Phrases

##### At

not at all: *not in any way*  
at any rate: *whatever happens*  
at a distance: *not near*  
at first: *at the beginning*  
at hand: *near; readily available*  
at a loss: *uncertain what to do or say*  
at the moment: *now*  
at present: *now*  
at risk: *threatened by danger or loss*

##### In

in addition to: *as well as*  
be in agreement with: *have the same opinion as*  
in brief: *in a few words*  
be in charge of: *have responsibility for*  
in common: *shared by all members of a group*  
in control: *having the power to direct something*  
in danger: *likely to be harmed*  
in demand: *desired by many people*  
in detail: *(explain something) thoroughly*  
in earnest: *seriously; in a determined way*  
in fact: *in reality; really*  
in favour of: *supporting (an idea)*  
in a flash: *very quickly; suddenly*  
in general: *usually; as a whole*  
in a hurry: *trying to accomplish something quickly*  
in kind: *(payment) in goods rather than in money*  
in the long term: *looking ahead to the distant future*  
in a moment: *soon; quickly*  
in order to: *for the purpose of*  
in power: *(of a political party) holding office*  
in public: *openly; not in private*  
in a second: *soon; quickly*  
in stock: *(of goods at a store) present and available*  
be in time: *not be late*

##### On

on account of: *because of*  
on behalf of: *for; in the interests of*  
on business: *as part of one's work*  
on demand: *when asked for*  
on duty: *engaged in one's regular work*  
to go on foot: *to walk*  
on no account: *absolutely not*  
on the other hand: *in contrast*  
on sale: *being sold at a lower price than usual*  
on the whole: *taking everything into consideration*

at all times: *always*  
at close quarters: *very near*  
at fault: *causing something wrong*  
see at a glance: *see immediately*  
at last: *finally, after some delay*  
at the mercy of: *without defense against*  
at once: *immediately*  
at rest: *not moving*  
at this point: *at this place; at this moment*

in advance: *before*  
in any case: *whatever happens*  
in bulk: *in large amounts*  
once in a while: *occasionally*  
in vain: *without success*  
in the course of: *during*  
in debt: *owing money*  
in depth: *(investigate something) thoroughly*  
in doubt: *uncertain*  
in effect: *(of rules) operating*  
in fashion: *fashionable*  
in flames: *burning, with visible flames*  
in full: *without omitting anything*  
hand in hand: *occurring together*  
in a minute: *soon*  
in no time: *very soon; very quickly*  
in the long run: *in the end; eventually*  
in order of: *arranged according to*  
in particular: *especially*  
in private: *not in front of other people*  
in reality: *really*  
in sight: *able to be seen*  
in that case: *if that is true*  
in tune: *at the correct pitch*

on the average: *usually; normally*  
on board: *on a ship or airplane*  
on condition that: *only if; provided that*  
on display: *being exhibited*  
on fire: *burning*  
get on one's nerves: *annoy; irritate*  
on order: *requested but not yet delivered*  
on purpose: *deliberately*  
on time: *at the correct time*  
on the verge of: *very close to; about to*