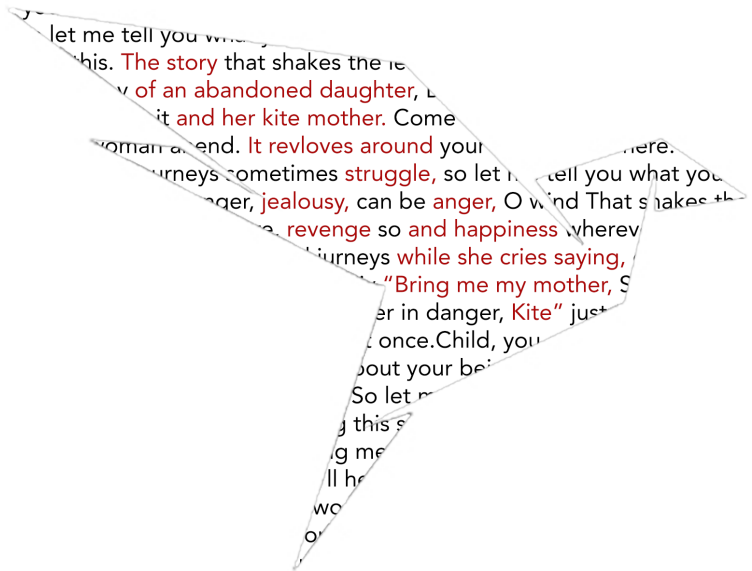


The Kite's Daughter

Assamese



A rich potter had no sons. His wife bore him only daughters. When his wife became pregnant again, he told her, "You'd beter not give birth to a daughter this time. If you do, I'll sell you to the Gypsies."

When she was about to give birth, the potter's wife went to her mother's house, as it was the custom. Unfortunately, this time too she brought forth a daughter.

This made her tremble with fear, and before her husband could ever hear of it she wrapped the child in a sari, put it in a pot, covered it with another cloth, and set it afloat in the river. As it drifted down the river, a washerman who was washing clothes on the bank saw the pot, became curious, swam towards it, and brought it to the shore. When he uncovered it, he was a bit dismayed to see the little baby in it. Just as he was wondering how he would present it to his wife, a big kite pounced on the baby and flew away with it to her nest on a banyan tree. The kite had taken one look at the baby and felt great love for it. The child looked lovely to her, and she wanted to bring it up.

She then built a large nest high up in the branches and made the baby comfortable in it. Whenever she saw anything in the human world that seemed good for the child, she would swoop down on it and bring it to the child. Food, clothes, toys—she provided the baby everything. The baby grew up into a pretty little girl.

One day, while she was looking for a dress for her child, the kite spied the princess of the realm bathing in a special place in the river. She had left her clothes and jewelry on the bank. So the kite's daughter now had royal clothes. She soon had brushes, combs, mirrors, vermilion pots and oil cups and whatnot.

The little girl grew up into a charming young woman. And she stayed in the tree which was her home. One day the kite said to her,

“Child, you are now a grown young woman and I’m anxious about your being alone here. I have to make long journeys sometimes. So let me tell you what you can do. If you are ever in danger, just sing this song:

O wind

That shakes the leaves

Of this banyan tree,

Bring me my mother,

Bring me my mother, my kite!

And wherever I am, I’ll hear it and come home at once.”

One warm day, a merchant sat down under the tree to rest from his journey and the heat of day. The forest was still and there was no sign of any other human being. But suddenly a long hair floated down and fell on his lap. It was silken and very long, seven cubits long. The merchant was surprised and looked up at the tree. There he saw a beautiful girl combing her hair very comfortably on a branch. The merchant, almost gasping with surprise now, said to her, “Who are you? Are you a human being or are you a goddess? Or are you an evil spirit? What are you?”

The poor girl had never before seen a man, though she had heard of them from her kite mother. At the first sight of a man, she was scared and didn’t know how to answer him. So she sang as she had been taught;

O wind

That shakes the leaves

Of this banyan tree,

Bring me my mother,

Bring me my mother, my kite!

And the kite appeared at once and asked her, "Child, what's the matter?" In reply, her daughter could only point to the man standing under the tree. The kite looked at him and like any mother sized him up quickly.

She thought, "If this man is as good as he looks, he would make a very good husband for my girl."

Then the kite went and perched beside the handsome young merchant and told him the whole history of the girl. He said, "I'm blessed with the goods of this world. I have seven wives already. If you don't mind that, I'll make your daughter my wife and I promise I'll love her and look after her.

She'll never want for anything. Never will she have a moment's trouble."

The kite was pleased with this straightforward and honorable answer.

She thought for a moment and she agreed. She had some trouble, however, in persuading her daughter to leave her and go with the merchant. But she did, and then brought her down dressed in bridal clothes that she had collected towards this auspicious day, and gave her in marriage to the merchant. She begged him with tears in her eyes to look after her dear daughter. Then she whispered in the girl's ear that she could summon her with her song whenever she wanted.

The merchant took his bride home. He loved her and lavished every attention on her. His other seven wives were extremely jealous. They were afraid he would forget them, now that he had this beauty for his youngest wife. So all seven wives did their best to give her a bad time.

One day, they all came to her and said, "You think you're a cut above us, don't you? We have to cook and clean and do all the household chores while you eat and sleep. Go into the kitchen and cook for us today."

The poor girl had never cooked anything in her life. When she was left alone

in the kitchen, she began to cry helplessly. Then she suddenly remembered her mother kite, went out into the orchard behind the house, and sang her mother's song. And the kite, true to her word, appeared at once and asked her, "Why did you call me? Why are you crying?"

When she heard about her daughter's trouble, she said, "Is that all? That's nothing we can't take care of. I'll show you how to cook. Fill a cooking pot with water throw a grain of rice into it. In another pot of water, throw a few vegetables. Set both pots on the stove and put some firewood under them. Then do nothing else, and leave the kitchen. When you come back, you'll find as much rice and vegetables as anybody can eat. It'll be inexhaustible and you can feed the whole household. And the cooking will be delicious. You'll see."

The kite then flew away. The daughter did exactly as she was told and had a wonderful meal ready in no time at all. The seven wives sat down to their meal. They dug holes under their plates, and when the kite's daughter served them food they threw it into the holes and asked her more. But the food was inexhaustible, and when they tried it they couldn't help loving it in spite of themselves. So the co-wives had to admit defeat.

Another day, they asked her to sweep the cowshed. As she had never done anything like that before, she stood under the banana tree near the shed and sang again to summon her mother:

O wind

That shakes the leaves

Of this banana tree,

Bring me my mother,

Bring me my mother, my kite!

When the kite appeared and heard about her task for the day, she said,

"Oh, that's nothing. Take one twig from the broom and wave it gently along the length of the cowshed. And see what happens."

The girl did as her mother told her to, and the cowshed was swept so clean that nobody had ever seen anything so clean before. The merchant was very pleased with her and loved her even more.

The Chait Bihu festival was approaching. The merchant gave five measures of cotton to each of his eight wives and asked them to make him clothes for the occasion. He added that he would like to see who made the best. The seven co-wives set to work at once. They plucked the fibers, separated them from the seed, spun the cotton, and started weaving the cloth. But the eighth wife, who too wanted to do things like them and didn't know how, sat in a corner quite dejected. The co-wives happily said to each other, "Now her game is up. She doesn't know a thing about spinning and weaving. He'll throw her out, that's all."

But that night, she cried and sang in the orchard and summoned her mother, who anxiously asked, "What is it my dear? Why did you call me this time?" Her daughter told her she needed to weave five measures of cotton and didn't know how. The kite said, "Don't you worry. You'll be able to do it. When I leave, get four bamboo caskets and fill each with some cotton.

Seal them and do nothing else. When your husband asks for his clothes on the day of the festival, hand him the four caskets."

The kite's daughter did as she was told by her mother. Her co-wives went on weaving with a great deal of show and noise. When they saw her doing nothing, they were beside themselves with joy and said to each other,

"This fool doesn't know a thing about spinning and weaving. On Bihu Day, we'll see the fun when our husband asks her for the clothes. Just can't wait!"

On the day of the festival, the seven wives gave their husband seven sets of clothes. The eighth gave him four bamboo caskets. The co-wives laughed gleefully, and even the merchant was a bit angry. He asked her,

“What’s all this? Where are my clothes?” She said, “Just open the caskets and see.”

When the merchant opened the caskets, he found the most divine finery in them. The clothes were woven so fine that those of the others looked like coarse rags in the eyes of the merchant and everyone else. The merchant tore up the clothes made by the seven elder wives and wore most happily for days the clothes given him by the kite’s daughter.

In course of time, the seven wives came to know that their co-wife had help from a kite in all the magical things she did. They put their heads together, plotted for days, and came up with a plan to do away with the kite.

One of them spied on the kite’s daughter and learned the song with which she summoned her mother. Then she sang the song, imitating the girl’s voice, and called the kite to the cowshed. As soon as the bird came into the shed, the jealous co-wife beat her to death with a broom and buried her under a heap of cow dung. The kite’s daughter didn’t suspect a thing. After her mother’s death, the girl sang many times for her but the kite never came.

She gradually began to suspect that something was wrong, and it dawned on her one day that her co-wives had killed her mother. She was beside herself with grief.

Meanwhile the merchant was preoccupied with his own work and had to leave home on business. Before he left, he ordered his seven wives to look after his youngest wife.

A few weeks after his departure, a tradesman came to the village in a boat to sell combs, mirrors, vermilion, scents and oils, and other such things that womenfolk love to buy. The merchant’s seven wives went to him, bought a roomful of his goods, and said that they would give him in return the most beautiful girl he had ever set his eyes on. They described her beauty in such tempting terms that the tradesman was eager for the exchange. Then they tried to persuade their young co-wife to go with them the next time they

went to buy all those lovely things. She replied, "No, sisters, I don't want anything. Besides, he, my husband, has asked me not to leave the house and go anywhere." But the co-wives were not about to give up their plan, so they coaxed her and cajoled her till she yielded. They all went to the riverside and took her into the boat to see the tradesman's wares. While she was looking at them, they slipped away and made a signal, at which the boatmen cut the moorings and the tradesman sailed away with the girl.

He took her home and gave her work to do. His house was on the bank of the river, and the girl had to sit in the hot sun and look after the drying fish. There she would sit all day and sing a sad song:

My mother was a potter's wife.

She let me drift along the river.

My mother was a kite who brought me up.

A merchant prince was my husband then,

And my seven co-wives sold me to a fisherman.

Here I sit, a guardian now of drying fish.

One day, the merchant happened to pass by along the river in his boat. He was returning home from his long journey. He heard the song and recognized the voice, and asked his boatmen to stop the boat. To his great delight, it was his own wife who was singing the sad song! So he went up to her and asked her how she came to be where she was, and she told him everything. He took her home in his boat. When they reached home, he put her in a box with breathing-holes and took it into his bedroom with all his other boxes. Then he called his seven wives and asked them about the eighth wife, and they replied almost in a chorus that she had gone to her mother's house quite some time ago and had not come back. The merchant said, "I'm afraid you've done something to her. I want to see whether you're telling the truth or not. So I'm

going to test you.”

He ordered his men to dig a deep pit and fill it with thorns. Then he asked them to tie a thread across the whole length of the pit. After that, he asked his wives to cross the pit walking on the thread. “If you’re innocent, nothing will happen to you. If you’re guilty, you’ll fall in and die.”

They tried in vain to talk him out of it, but they were forced to take the test. One by one they attempted to cross the pit on the thread, and six of them fell into the pit of thorns. Each time, the thread gave way and was replaced by another. Only the seventh wife succeeded in going across to the other side. It turned out that she was not really guilty. She had been busy cooking in the kitchen all along and had had no part in the plot to lure the kite’s daughter into the Tradesman’s boat. The thread did not give way even though she crawled across it seven times.

The merchant then had his six bad wives buried alive in that same pit.

Then he lived peacefully and happily with his seventh wife and the kite’s daughter.