

This time I knew I would receive no mercy. The red was spreading thick and fast. I sat down, waiting to be carted away to my mother's place.

"Don't admire a barren tree, you will go childless," my mother used to hiss. But I rather liked the gaunt sketches of the leafless trees—their nudity so sensuous, so brave—looking like Aadaam before he felt shame and reached for a leaf to cover his pride.

A few years into my childless marriage, my mother cited causes for it, including that my uterus was stuck like a "deflated balloon". She attributed it to my love for barren trees. The in-laws' imagination was slightly better. They felt the foetus their son ejaculated didn't "feel at home" in me and hence kept falling down between my legs. They often called me *Maladi* —the barren one.

My man meanwhile went on a rampage, planting wild seeds all over the place. When the good lady from "Samastha Help Women" tried to counsel him, he said he would have gladly listened, if only her blouse was cut one inch deeper.

People stood shuffling outside my door. The horse cart must have arrived. Without ado, I tottered up the cart to squeeze between the boxes. My man watched, smoking leisurely. Once I had left, talks for his second marriage would resume more peacefully.

The horse trotted on. I dreaded the look of pain in my mother's eyes.

So hopefully did I participate in the Hunter God ritual, where lying face down with other *Maladis*, I let the priest walk priss-press on my buttocks with his holy sandal of nails to hasten conception. Yet my periods descended, plunging the house in a mood murkier than the reddish brown

SHORT STORY

The Barren Tree Blooms

○ Jaya Madhavan

I dripped. On the fourth day, hope arose again. Hands tied behind, I bent to eat of the rice served straight on the earth. Another obeisance to another fertile God! I always smelt the rice deeply before eating, for on our side of the country the *pillay* insect was often mixed live into the rice in the hope that the scavenger would clean out the unyielding uterus.

A sudden piercing cry shattered my reverie. Following my ear I tore across the fields, until I stumbled upon a woman. She was in labour. I saw a faint shape of the head emerging. I hollered out to the cart man to hurry with the water flask and some cloth from my boxes. Hastily I spread some saris beneath her and fed her warm water. I had no idea if this was the done thing to do—to

offer water during childbirth. But the woman was now pushing hard, really hard, and suddenly in one huge shove, a bundle of life flew into my waiting hands. Kicking and howling the child hit my face in soft slaps.

Only when the good lady from Samastha touched my shoulder did I realize I was both crying and laughing. She took one look at the cart and the luggage and understood everything.

Mother and child safe, we stepped aside.

"We need a midwife around this area," she said.

I started.

"Tens of women, like this lady here deliver in fields, homes, and roadsides—alone and unattended. Many die. Samastha is building a small clinic. The midwife will be trained and given a modest salary, food, and accommodation."

She waited.

I looked at the new mother smiling up gratefully at me. The sari beneath her shone. It was my wedding sari, now appropriately dirtied, nicely muddied, and stained beyond use. My hands throbbed with the memory of the bundle of life I held.

I laughed. I, the barren one, was going to deliver new lives to the world!

I laughed long and loud. Somewhere, a barren tree was bursting into blooms. □

