

The Words That Fell Between the Lines

My *ammachi* (grandmother) sat at the edge of her woven mat, sari pleated, eyes closed. Her voice moved in ripples. The first prayer I learned wasn't written down.

It was recited into my skin.

Vowels, low, slow, soaked in devotion.

“ഞങ്ങളുടെ പ്രാർത്ഥനകൾ കേൾക്കേണമേ.” (*Let our prayers be heard*).

I didn't understand every word, but I understood the weight.

This language, Malayalam, was the first rhythm my ears knew.

It echoed in lullabies, in the way my name curved off her tongue, in the stern love of my parents.

It wasn't just communication. It was *inheritance*.

And yet, here I am.

Unable to read its script.

Struggling to write a sentence.

Thinking my deepest thoughts in a language that isn't mine.

When I speak Malayalam,

I do not speak alone.

My grandmother speaks through me.

My ancestors whisper through the vowels

curved like coconut fronds,

sharp like tamarind,

soft like steam from rice.

When I say “യേശു” (Jesus), she is with me.

When I say “ആമേൻ ” (Amen), she listens.

But I do not know how to write her voice.

I cannot ink her name.

The script slips through me like water through a sieve.

And I wonder:

What truths have I lost in translation?

There's a strange kind of silence that lives between languages. I feel it most when I'm alone.

When I try to journal in Malayalam, I write one word ജീവിതം (*Life*) and stop. The letters feel borrowed, too elegant for my unpracticed hand. I stare at the blank space that follows, not because I have nothing to say, but because I don't know how to say it the *right* way.

In English, I can explain. I can debate, dissect, defend. But in Malayalam? I feel like I'm knocking at the door of a house that should be mine, waiting for someone else to let me in.

Sometimes I hear my parents on the phone, voices lit with a fluency I've never had. The way they switch registers, formal for elders, casual for cousins, playful for friends. I sit there, half-smiling, half-lost. I catch fragments. I build meaning like patchwork.

But meaning isn't fluency.

Fluency is being able to interrupt.

To make jokes.

To argue.

To *belong*.

And so I stay quiet, not out of shame, but out of distance. Like a memory you can almost touch, but not quite trust.

Language is power.

Colonialism knew this.

That's why they renamed our cities. Our rivers. Our gods.

That's why they replaced our mother tongues with schoolbooks filled with English alphabets and foreign authors.

That's why even now, fluency in English is seen as intelligence, status, and survival.

But language is also resistance.

When I speak Malayalam, however broken, however hesitant – I reclaim something.

A space.

A sound.

A self.

I don't yet have the tools to write essays in my language.

I cannot read the books my grandparents grew up with.

I cannot think abstractly, philosophically, or profoundly in it.

And so I ask myself: *What am I missing?*

What part of me lies dormant, waiting to be spoken?

Yet I believe this:

Language is not just grammar. It is breath.

It is the way my tongue curls to say “അമ്മാ ” (Mum).

It is the warmth that floods me when I hear “ചോറ് വേണോ ” (Do you want rice?).

It is prayer not written, but remembered.

And in every prayer I recite, my grandmother lives again.

Fluency is not just knowing every word.

Sometimes, fluency is fire, refusing to be extinguished.

And one day, I will return to the script.

I will learn the letters.

I will read the language that raised me.

Because I am not just trying to remember my tongue.

I am trying to remember *myself*.

Glossary

Ammachi - Manglish (Malayalam written using English characters). Commonly used by middle-class children to address their mothers. Though traditionally reserved for one's own mother, I began calling my grandmother Ammachi after hearing my mother use it for hers.

ഞങ്ങളുടെ പ്രാർത്ഥന കേൾക്കണമേ (**Njangalude Praarthana Kelkkename**) - A phrase often spoken after prayers in Christian households in Kerala, meaning “Let our prayers be heard.”

യേശു (**Yeshu**) - Jesus. In Catholic Christian communities in Kerala, the word God is rarely used; instead, people refer directly to Yeshu.

ആമേൻ (**Aamen**) - Amen.

ജീവിതം (**Jeevitham**) - Life; not just existence, but the fullness of a lived experience.

അമ്മ (Amma) - A term used more often by working-class or rural children to refer to their mothers. Carries a distinct tone of intimacy and rootedness.

ചോറ് വേണോ (Choru Veno) - "Do you want rice?" A phrase universally used by parents in Kerala to call children to meals - regardless of whether rice is actually being served.