Silence; have you ever wondered if silence speaks? If it does, then how it speaks? My research is about silence, but a very particular sort.

In 2006, I started working as a clinical psychologist in Sri Lanka, working with conflict-affected communities. They told me stories of war-related violence, infuriating injustices and immense human resilience. A woman described the rotten smell of alcohol, coming from her rapist’s heavy breath. A child survivor of sexual abuse told me the filth the abuser whispered into her ears as he went about abusing her. I desperately wanted to help. In my way of working, healing starts with emotion. So I waited for my clients to bring out their emotions. They never did. Their stories had all the factual details about the events. But when it came to how they felt about it, they gave me one answer; silence. And that is what I am studying in my PhD. What are emotions to my people and why silence.

The suffering of my informants is beyond the expressive capacity of words. But that is not the only reason behind their silence. Living in a context where one wrong word can bring you death, silence is a heaven of safety. Yet, despite such political silencing, emotions still get a voice. For instance, my study shows how rituals of commemorating the death or disappearance of a loved one create spaces where emotions find a powerful voice. As a whole, I believe what this project shows us are the innovative ways in which people do not just survive, but live in a world that is deeply scarred with violence.

So what? What is so important about Sri Lanka and the silence of its people? Well, I want you to know that Sri Lanka is not isolated in its trauma. As we speak, more than half of the world’s nations are experiencing conflict and its aftermaths. All this time, we heard the worst of these nations; torture, rape, death, genocide. But these same nations teach us powerful lessons of human resilience and creative survival. Only, we did not hear them. Imagine her silence amplified at a global scale. If we know the voice of that silence, we can hear their stories, not only of pain and suffering, but also of undefeatable hope and life itself.