

Sofia Ashraf discusses dissent, feminism and desi goth

LIVE AND LET LIVE

PARSHATHY J NATH

Twelve-year-old Sofia Ashraf was a very different person from the inspiring firebrand you see today. She says she would cry herself to sleep, praying she woke up a boy the next morning. Her conservative family was against a girl performing on stage in front of the world. From that heartbroken child, she has evolved into a raptivist, an independent thinker and a staunch feminist.

An hour before her performance for the Poetry with Prakriti session at the Secret Society bar in RA Puram, she gushes about her latest performance in New Delhi. She is now living life on her own terms in Mumbai. As for her family? Ashraf says they now have a “live” and “let live” attitude towards each other.

In fact, the golden woollen overcoat she is wearing tonight is a gift from her mother. Stating that she believes in promoting local handicraft, Ashraf goes on to talk about about her fluctuating sartorial fancies like desi goth, a style she has evolved for herself. “Big bindis and black lipstick” she grins, instantly giving off a warm, friendly vibe.

Which brings up her latest, ‘I Can’t Do Sexy’, a video that aims to challenge



existing beauty standards. She says, “But, I am not anti-makeup. I like the Priyanka Chopras and Deepik Padukones. When I want to do makeup, I will. It is a question of accepting who you are. But, when I was growing up, I had a lot of strong female musicians like Pink, Lauryn Hill and Alanis Morissette telling me that I don’t need to fit into conventional ideas of sexiness. Where are all they, now?”

As a 10-year-old, she says she spent hours on her laptop. “In a conventional family, the moment the girl turns 15, they start saving money to buy jewellery. I refused to go to a jewellery shop

and instead demanded a laptop. If we start equipping our women, instead of adorning them, we will have a completely different generation,” she states.

While in college, she also ran an Islamic youth group that hosted discussions on world religion. She says learning about other religions helped her develop a theoretical approach to her own faith.

After that her association with NGOs such as Vettiver Collective, which was then known as Youth for Social Change, influenced her. Interactions with artistes such as Carnatic

EVERYTHING BLACK

The goth subculture adopts dark fashion elements such as black clothing, dyed black hair, dark eyeliner, black fingernails, and black period-styled clothing, besides a focus on gothic rock and a range of other music genres.



vocalist TM Krishna opened her to new forms of music including Carnatic and *villupaatu*, which she used in a video called ‘Period Paatu’. Her ‘Kodai-kanal Won’t’ rap video (released by the NGO Jhatkaa.org), highlighting mercury contamination in Kodaikanal, went viral on social media.

On student politics

Ashraf says the student politics scene in Chennai has always been policed. “But, this is also a city that gave rise to Periyar (social activist and politician) and the Dravidian movement. The MGRs and Karunanidhis started off with a vision

Dissent with a smile The raptivist and artiste uses music to raise her voice on gender

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here. Jayalalithaa stood up against patriarchal aggression. Karunanidhi was the first openly atheist politician. No one in the country had the spine to do that,” she states. Ashraf says Jallikattu was a refreshing show of defiance. She says she is glad people took to the streets, refusing to let politicians participate. “But, I could not align with the cultural chauvinism and show of toxic masculinity. Why do we need jallikattu to protect our cattle?” But, she quickly adds that she does not believe in bans. “I believe that laws need to be put in place. Look what is happening now. People are dying, the bulls are mistreated,” says the graphic design student of Stella Maris College.

She adds that Tamil pride should not be forced down people’s throats either. “I love Tamil, its a beautiful language. But, the way for any culture to evolve is to spread it with love.” She explains by taking an example from her own life. When people derided her for her bad Tamil, she stopped speaking it. Then, after making friends with lyricist, poet and activist Kutti Revathi, she says she developed a new found love for the language.

Ashraf says she believes it is important to engage with people who have different opinions. That’s how she overcame the flurry of hate mail and messages that her “Tam-Brahm boy” video elicited. She says the song aimed to flip the concept of the item number by making the man the object. It drew flak from Dalit activists for romanticising a “Tam-Brahm identity” through obvious cultural and caste-related references and stereotypes.

“I wanted to hear them out. If you are talking about dissent, you must be willing to listen to dissent about your own videos,” she says. Ashraf responded to the criticism by making a public apology for being caste blind. “I believe no one is born free of social conditioning. Because all these are social constructs. And, I was living in a privileged bubble.”

But, that does not mean she will not continue her fight for equal pay or to wear a mini skirt. “It is silly compared to the fact that somewhere else, there is a woman being raped on the street. But just because someone is facing a tougher struggle, yours can’t be discounted.”