

ALBUMS

Cashmere

Swet Shop Boys

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The transatlantic duo of Heems (ex-Das Racist) and Riz MC (actor Riz Ahmed) link up for an album of politically-charged rap that's both thought-provoking and genuinely fun.

Even just on paper, Heems and Riz MC are perfect foils for one another. Heems is a rapper (and former member of Das Racist) of Indian descent, though his family has roots in Pakistan. Riz is a rapper (and actor increasingly known for his role in HBO's “The Night

Of”) of Pakistani descent whose family history can be traced back over the Indian side of the border. Heems hails from Queens, Riz from London. Heems is sharp-witted but raps with a relaxed cadence while Riz spits in the pointed, rapid-fire bursts that characterize grime. The two MCs make for a formidable pair on record, complimenting each other sonically while seeking out the overlap between their perspectives.

After testing out their chemistry on a four song EP, Heems and Riz have now committed to the Swet Shop Boys project with the full-length *Cashmere*. Unlike the *Swet Shop EP*, which enlisted production from Ryan Hemsworth, Lushlife, and others, *Cashmere* was entirely helmed by London-based producer Redinho. In keeping with the EP’s sound, Redinho constructs propulsive beats from South Asian samples, providing ample fodder over which the Boys trade verses. Clocking in at just 34 minutes, *Cashmere* is more focused and consistent than any solo release from either rapper. In the push and pull between their styles, they find a compelling balance between hip-hop and agitprop, arriving at songs that are as enjoyable as they are thought-provoking.

Lead single and opener “T5” offers a representative sample: over a screeching shehnai and heavy 808 thuds, the duo catalog the hassles of traveling while brown, skewer euphemistic security speak and situate themselves within the South Asian diaspora (“I run the city like my name’s Sadiq”). “No Fly List” builds a slinky banger around Heems’ hilarious flex, “I’m so fly, bitch/But I’m on a no fly list.” “Shottin” weaves tales about the NYPD’s surveillance of mosques using the time-tested format of true crime boom-bap. Only the goofy club number “Tiger Hologram” really falls flat, feeling like an inside joke we’re not privy to and featuring an entire verse where Heems raps with a comical lack of effort—about as funny as salt in a wound to anyone who’s continued to root for him post-Das Racist. While there are a few moments like this on *Cashmere*, the hungrier Riz usually picks up the slack. And when Heems *does* show up on these tracks, he sounds effortlessly charismatic, like when he’s twisting rap tropes into worldly new shapes on “No Fly List” (“Sweatsuit on with an Hermès turban/Pull up on a bad, brown *ting* out in Durban”).

While both rappers excel at making politics feel personal, Riz comes across as the more

academic one, or as he puts it, “Rizzy speaks like Wikileaks investigations.” He raps passionately, though often from a remove, and peppers his lines with citations. For instance, on “T5,” he reaches all the way back to *The Iliad* to critique anti-refugee fear mongering, though he still manages to clown on less-woke rappers in the same breath (“We’re militant/You’re on a Milli Vanilli vibe”). Heems, meanwhile, takes a more personal tack, empathetically sliding into different perspectives as often as he leverages his own. He delights in erasing the post-colonial line between the Indian and Pakistani identities, tossing his New York rapper bonafides into the blender for good measure. On “Phone Tap,” he’s “Pakistani with a pack,” while in “Shottin,” he’s rocking a “Yankee hat with the kufi on top.” When Heems speaks from his own perspective, it’s often on issues that hit closer to home: racial profiling, tense interactions with authorities or outright racism (“Used to call me curry/Now they cook it in they kitchen”).

This is heavy stuff and as fun as it can be, *Cashmere* is an unabashedly political record, careening from one geopolitical issue to the next the way that most rap albums treat boasts. Ultimately, though, its most impactful moments lie in the simple act of representation. Album highlight “Zayn Malik” acknowledges as much: behind its clever punning (“Look, Zayn Malik’s got more than 80 virgins on him/There’s more than one direction to get to paradise”) lies a sincere desire to symbolize something (Heems’ aspirational quip “I am a college dorm room poster”). Malik is invoked as more than just a punchline here: alongside M.I.A., he’s been among the first South Asian celebrities to represent something more than a threat, egghead or other in western pop culture. The Swet Shop Boys seek to further broaden our understanding, an ambition that’s right there in the title. To Westerners, cashmere is a luxury textile; to South Asians, it’s the site of a violent territorial dispute between India and Pakistan that hinges on questions of identity. It’s a perfect title for a project that blurs the lines between all of these perspectives, that stunts as much as it elucidates, and which ties up all of these messy ideas into a refreshingly expansive vision of South Asian identity.