
Book Reviews

Vanita, Ruth, *Shakespeare's Re-Visions of History: Social Collusion, Violence and Resistance in Nine Plays*. Primus Books, 2025, 285 pp., Rs. 1195, ISBN 978-93-6627-400-3

Reviewed by Rajiva Verma

Ruth Vanita's book brings a breath of fresh air in the musty world of academic publications. Unlike the majority of such publications, it can be read even by non-specialists with profit and pleasure. Moreover, though its chapters were originally published as separate articles in various publications at different times, the book has a running theme and argument which is lacking in many scholarly publications in the form of collections of essays.

Vanita's central argument is that the violence depicted in many of the plays, even when it appears to be purely private or domestic or the consequence of individual passion, is perpetrated by social collusion. Men are usually the dominant or only partners in this collusion, which can be either deliberate or unconscious. Vanita's analysis of *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* from this perspective is rich and insightful. About *The Taming of the Shrew*, she states boldly that it is an early study by Shakespeare about "how society colludes with men against women" (p. 4). Citing Elizabethan marriage manuals, she argues that Petruchio's taming of Kate violates Elizabethan ideals of a Christian husband and a good marriage and that Kate's homily at the end of the play on the wife's duty to unquestioningly obey her husband is also violative of the ideals set forth in the manuals. She sees the play as a tragicomedy that presents the taming as a "tragic social reality" (p. 31). In the *Merchant* the target of social collusion is a Jew rather than a woman, and for Vanita the play is Shakespeare's "critique of anti-Semitism" (p. 5). About *Othello*, she makes the arresting point that unlike Shakespeare's other jealous husbands, all of whom are white, Othello is a sympathetic figure, loved by most characters in the play. Therefore, he is not really a victim of social collusion, which in the play works in subtler and unconscious ways to differentiate between the treatment of men and women. The men are quick to act to prevent men from hurting

or killing other men, but no one intervenes when Desdemona is killed by Othello and Emilia by Iago. Thus, as Vanita puts it, “white and black husbands can and do behave in similar ways when they feel threatened by their wives” (p. 150).

Unlike the plays mentioned above, there are some, including *King Lear* and *The Winter’s Tale*, where several characters, who may be taken to represent society at large, refuse to collude with the perpetrator of violence and seek to protect the victim, though they are not always successful. The brief chapter on *King Lear* brings out strongly the virtues of Vanita’s extraordinary ability to remain rooted in “ordinary awareness and common sense” (p. 188), to use a phrase that she herself has quoted from another critic. This allows her to cut through the thickets of much contemporary criticism of the play including feminist, psychoanalytic and Marxist criticism, to get to the ethical core of the play and distinguish between “imperfection and wickedness” in the characters (p. 188). Lear and Gloucester may be imperfect, but Goneril and Regan are evil. Vanita also uses examples from traditional and modern Indian society to telling effect to get the moral perspective right, for in many ways we are nearer to the play’s moral and emotional core than contemporary Western society. But things are changing here too and “Shakespeare’s ‘early modern’ society was on a similar cusp as Indian society is today” (p. 182).

Vanita argues that Shakespeare’s plays depict the social collusion behind the violence perpetrated against “less powerful groups, such as women, old people, Jews, and Catholics” (p. 3). However, she points out:

Against this realistic view of history Shakespeare presents a vision of empowerment that draws on imaginative sources, especially visual and verbal art associated with the figure of the Virgin Mary and the saints, particularly women saints, as symbols of community, creativity and joy. (p. 4)

Indeed, it is a fascinating fact that the later plays of Shakespeare, particularly the ‘Romances’, have strong women characters who, as mothers and/or daughters, play central roles representing forces of spiritual or psychological redemption. Vanita focuses, in particular, on Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, Cordelia in *King Lear*, Hermione, Paulina and Perdita in *The Winter’s Tale*, and Queen Katherine in *Henry VIII*. She writes about the consolation and the vision of spiritual

empowerment associated with such women either as individuals or as members of “same-sex celibate communities” (p. 219) with great passion and conviction, though her study is always grounded in a close reading of the text and a wide and impressive range of historical and literary scholarship on Mariology and related subjects.

Vanita’s views about Shakespeare’s views about religion and about women, Jews, and other oppressed classes is nuanced and reasonable. As she puts it, “Shakespeare’s plays are impelled by sympathy, not ideology” (p. 9), and one can say that this applies, by and large, to her own criticism as well. Unfortunately, though, that is not always the case and ‘ideology’ does sometimes come to dominate her reading of the plays or characters. One example is her reading of the Celia-Rosalind relationship in *As You Like It* as a homo-erotic one. This is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of the evidence produced for this and only three counter points must suffice: First, when Rosalind asks where the two of them could go after leaving the court, Celia answers, “to seek my uncle [Rosalind’s father] in the Forest of Arden” (1.3.180). Then, a little later, Rosalind suggests that they take the clown with them and Celia readily agrees. This is hardly the way two lovers will plan to run away and live together! And finally, Celia and Oliver fall in love at first sight. The way Rosalind describes them “They are in the very wrath of love and they will together. Clubs cannot part them” (5.2.40), hardly suggests that Celia falls in love on the rebound. Going to the text of the play after reading Vanita’s interpretation feels like moving from a closed room into open air and the clear light of day.

There are other instances where Vanita’s valorisation of same-sex love or celibate communities of women and the downgrading of what she terms “heterosexual coupledness” (p. 184) lead to unconvincing readings of character or action. Thus, though she is prepared to countenance Paulina’s marriage with Camillo at the end of *The Winter’s Tale*, it is only half-hearted: “Like Isabella, Paulina remains silent when celibate community is hastily replaced by conjugality” (p. 222). In the chapter on *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure* Vanita writes: “Generic difference between the two plays appear in the way *Hamlet* concludes with a sense of release for its protagonist while *Measure* ends with the trapdoor closing on Isabella” (p. 72). The Duke in the latter play has had a bad press in recent criticism, accused of authoritarian surveillance, deception, cruelty and even voyeurism, and his offer of marriage to Isabella is

almost unanimously seen as manipulative and Isabella's silence a mark of helplessness or oppression. Vanita is broadly in agreement with such views. But reading the play alongside another so-called problem play *All's Well That Ends Well* shows it in a different perspective altogether. There is a substitution and a bed trick in both plays and an almost exact parallelism between the final scenes, including the stretching out of the moment of suspense to its maximum limit before the final revelation. Indeed, both these plays can be read as comedies which end with the disposing of lovers into "heterosexual coupledness" (p. 184). If it be argued that Isabella wanted to be a nun, the answer would be that she hadn't yet taken her final vows and was free to leave the nunnery. Besides, Shakespeare's comedies are full of instances of sudden transformations of feeling: in *Twelfth Night*, Duke Orsino has no problem at all in transferring at once all the love that he had invested in Olivia onto Viola once he discovers her true identity; Olivia on her part had decided to mourn her father's loss for ever but falls in love with Cesario at the very first sight; a little practical joke transforms in a moment Benedick and Beatrice from scorers of love into ardent lovers. Is it so surprising then that a scorer of earthly love like Isabella should turn to conjugality when it is offered to her, especially when she has been a participant in at least a part of the Duke's plan? There is indeed a touch of humourlessness in much commentary on the silence of Isabella and Paulina and the silencing of Beatrice with a kiss, for silence in the text need not be taken to imply that these characters should be seen as sulking in a corner on the stage during a performance! As for the Duke, surely there were in Shakespeare's time stories about good and wise rulers, such as Harun Al Rashid, who went about incognito to find out the true conditions in which their people lived and to ensure justice?

In spite of my disagreement with some of Vanita's interpretations I must reiterate my admiration for the book. There is not a page or two where one does not come across nuggets of insight. It had never struck me, for example, that Bassanio is the least anti-Semitic character in *The Merchant of Venice*. Vanita's scholarship is extensive and meticulous yet lightly borne and her style is simple, clear, and refreshingly free from the jargon of contemporary literary criticism. It was a pleasure to read the book.

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