

**Rare Creatures:
Remarkable Beauty's Inversion of
Expectations and Assumptions in The Ramayana and The House of Mirth**

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Our society generally believes that attractive people make more money, are more athletic, and attain more personal success than their less attractive counterparts (Chicago). Perceptions of beauty can provide great insights into the character not only of our own society, but also of the societies of numerous eras and regions. Through literature, for example, one can begin to analyze and interpret cultural views of beauty. In Ramesh Menon's version of The Ramayana, beauty is a reflection of the past - an indication of one's behavior and achievements in a previous life. On the contrary, in Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth, beauty is a reflection of the future - an indication of one's potential to ascend socially in this life. Both Sita and Lily possess a startling beauty that should presumably draw admiration, acceptance, and success; however, other societal expectations, such as chastity and dissimulation, conflict with the assumptions surrounding these women's beauty. Indeed, Sita and Lily's beauty is so striking that their societies twist the common expectations associated with beauty in such a way that they conflict with other commonly held expectations. As society wavers between admiring and distrusting great beauty, isolation ultimately becomes the only viable option for the two women. Thus, instead of incorporating each woman more deeply into society, beauty isolates Sita and Lily from their respective cultures.

Most characters who encounter Sita and Lily notice their beauty immediately and comment on the attributes that contribute to each woman's lovely external finish. However, these societies do not consider Sita and Lily as merely "beautiful"; rather, both

men and women regard these women as the epitome of beauty. In her ritual attire, Sita is the "embodiment of grace" (Menon 95). Even Sita's self-proclaimed enemy, Surpanaka, classifies her beauty as "the beauty by which all other beauty may be measured" (Menon 192). Clearly, Sita's perfect features and exquisite figure distinguish her from the rest of the women in *The Ramayana*. Lily, too, evokes the strongest of responses from those who see her. Long after Rosedale first encounters Lily, the "poignant surprise of her beauty" continues to seize him (Wharton 306). Lily's beauty also moves Selden, perhaps more powerfully than any other character. He perceives the "touch of poetry in her beauty" that certainly distinguishes her from the rest of her sex. Like Sita, Lily seems to be born with an "unassisted beauty" that makes her a rare creature (Wharton 141). Each of these women possesses an arresting beauty that immediately attracts the attention of those who see her. Few characters meet Sita or Lily without reacting either physically or emotionally to each woman's beauty.

Before and after encountering beauty such as Sita's and Lily's, the two societies develop expectations for the women. Sita's husband, Rama, wants her to look polished and untouched at all times. Even after an excruciating separation from his wife, Rama requests that Sita "bathe, put on silks and ornaments," and come to see him "as she used to be" (Menon 492). Additionally, this society above all cleaves to a particular quality in all women, and especially in beautiful women: chastity. Rama contends that even greater than the protection that an army can provide a woman is the protection that a woman's chastity can provide herself (Menon 493). Clearly, Sita's society maintains many expectations of her, and beauty is an integral component of these expectations. Lily's upper-class society also upholds many expectations of women. In particular, Lily feels

society's expectation that she "be pretty and well-dressed" at all times in an effort to secure marriage (Wharton 10). With great beauty, this expectation is intensified. Ned Van Alstyne, for example, examines Lily's beauty and concludes that "when a girl's as good looking as that she'd better marry" (Wharton 166). Apparently, in both Sita and Lily's societies, the expectation for women to remain attractive carries with it the idea that women should serve as a positive reflection of their husband's stature. One would assume that natural beauty would only help women meet these expectations, but Sita and Lily eventually discover that their extraordinary beauty may in fact hinder this process.

Society defines Sita and Lily almost solely by their beauty, which eventually contributes to the women's inability to reconcile their extraordinary beauty with societal expectations. When characters meet Sita and Lily, they often evaluate the two women based only on external qualities, failing to develop a fuller and more accurate perception of them. For example, when Ravana encounters Sita, he sees only her beauty, and concludes that in all his many years of life he has never "seen anyone like Sita" (Menon 202). Important to note here is that he comments on seeing Sita, rather than on meeting her or knowing her. He evaluates her based on her beauty and nothing else. Lily also consistently encounters those who simply see her, rather than become familiar with her. Even Selden, who does at least inwardly acknowledge the depth of Lily's character, only notices her external appearance in the very beginning of *The House of Mirth*. In fact, the novel opens with Selden's eyes being "refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart" (Wharton 1). In addition to being endowed with natural beauty, Lily is "brought up to be ornamental" (Wharton 315). From birth, Lily is raised to be defined by her external appearance. Even her mother's genuinely hopeful expectations for Lily seem to leave her

with a relatively superficial existence, only being regarded as "super-fine human merchandise" (Wharton 270). By defining Sita and Lily only in terms of their beauty, these two societies cheat themselves of the full character that lies beneath the externality of these two women. More importantly, they prevent the women from fully expressing themselves as more than just "golden image[s]" (Menon 651).

As these societies continue to define Sita and Lily by their striking beauty, they begin to skew the common assumptions associated with beauty. As a result, society fails to comprehend the true character behind the beauty, and each woman remains trapped by unjust and inescapable expectations. Sita is a vital member of a world in which beauty often reflects chastity and accomplishment in a past life. Throughout the novel, Sita adheres to these assumptions and acts according to dharma, never faltering in her loyalty to her husband. Rama, however, neglects the common assumptions surrounding pure beauty and instead adheres to another societal expectation: "no man of honor can take home a woman who has lived in his enemy's house" for as long as Sita has (Menon 494). Because Sita is so exceptionally beautiful, the society cannot comprehend how she could remain pure in the hands of a monster such as Ravana. Forced to prove herself, Sita creates and passes a test of fire, and only when she emerges "blemishless as she is born" does Rama openly accept her again (Menon 497). Society unjustly assumes the worst about Sita in part because they assume that her extraordinary beauty will have an uncontrollable and desirous effect on men; Rama concedes, "the world always judges by its own norms and the world is far from perfect" (Menon 498). Sita is trapped between the assumption that her beauty reflects inherent chastity and the assumption that her beauty is so powerful that she cannot control how she provokes desire in others. In a

world in which Sita's natural beauty should reflect so highly upon her, her beauty in fact contributes to conflicting assumptions. Lily also seems bound by contradictory expectations and assumptions. She knows that to fit in with this high society, one needs "patience, pliancy, and dissimulation" (Wharton 39). In other words, Lily should conceal her true feelings and downplay her attributes in order to gain acceptance from this society. However, society also expects Lily to use and flaunt her beauty. Rosedale justifies his proposal to her by saying, "I want my wife to make all other women feel small" (Wharton 185). He realizes that Lily's beauty can be of great power. But if Rosedale used Lily's beauty to help him fit into society, Lily would become alienated from the women she makes feel inferior. Lily does try to reveal her true beauty and integrate into this society at the same time in the tableaux vivants. The onlookers respond strongly to Lily's unassisted beauty, but so many respond with envy and with desire that Lily still cannot fit into high-society's expectation of "playing by the rules." Everyone wants to attract attention, and no one wants one person to attract too much attention. So society traps Lily between the assumption that beauty will bring acceptance and the desire for her to express her great beauty and thus set herself apart from the rest. These contradictory standards are the ones by which Lily is "fated to be measured" (Wharton 142). She and Sita soon realize that singular beauty can create unexpected situations.

Once society inverts common expectations and hinders Sita's and Lily's ability to thrive, the women arrive at a relative isolation from the societies they once longed for. Even after proving her purity in the test of fire, society subjects Sita to its unjust assumptions. Since society still questions Sita's chastity in relation to her immense beauty, Rama banishes her to an isolated hermitage. Rama's advisor speaks lucidly when

he notes that society "cannot understand chastity like Sita's" (Menon 599). Sita accepts the banishment, but cries out that "God has created this body of [hers] only for it to suffer" (Menon 601). She truly seems a victim of her enormous beauty and of her society's narrow-mindedness. This sinless woman who is "purity itself" encounters Rama again, and although he tells her to return to the kingdom, she refuses (Menon 649). By this time, she has realized that her great beauty and her accompanying perfection no longer have a place in this "tainted world of men" (Menon 650). Lily similarly realizes that she cannot honestly participate in the society that she once so vehemently wanted to join. After society's abuses force her features into a crystallization of "one hard, brilliant surface," she realizes that honestly expressing her beauty both inside and out does not suit this society (Wharton 200). She finally realizes that "a woman's dignity may cost more to keep up than her carriage" (Wharton 178). She recognizes the deeper parts of her personality, such as her determination and appreciation for artistic pleasures, but she also recognizes the limitations inherent in her background and in the social system itself. In response, she moves in with Gerty and then into a boarding house, and after a few attempts to reinsert herself into her "set," she disassociates herself with the "ever-revolving wheels of the great social machine" (Wharton 278). Realizing that she cannot reconcile her appreciation for beauty with the damaging assumptions of the upper class, Lily searches for darkness, a darkness that she "must have at any cost" (Wharton 342). By the end of *The Ramayana* and *The House of Mirth*, the prominent female figure deliberately isolates herself from the society that has made her ability to thrive nearly impossible.

In many cultures, including our own, those whom society considers beautiful are also considered more likely to find success in life. On the surface, Sita's and Lily's beauty seems to be a positive attribute that will offer great success and advantage. However, each woman's beauty is so remarkable that society creates new, exaggerated expectations that conflict with common assumptions. As society defines Sita and Lily by their beauty, contradictions develop between the women's beauty and other traits, such as chastity and dissimulation. Sita is indeed chaste and pure, but common assumptions about man's attraction to beauty interfere with society's perceptions of her chastity. Lily is clever and exceedingly aware of the various forms of beauty in life, but her own beauty causes society to fear her, envy her, and expect either too much or too little of her. In large part because of their inherent beauty, these women choose to remove themselves from the societies that they once appreciated. Instead of experiencing societal acceptance, Sita and Lily experience the curse of their flawless beauty. So while commonly held assumptions and general trends can give great insight into a society's values and culture, perhaps the ways in which societies respond to the exceptions, to the extraordinary people and occurrences, can provide even greater insight into the character of a culture.