

MATA HARI AND THE QUEST FOR TRUTH: A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF COELHO'S *THE SPY*



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Abstract: *This study aims to expose the experiences of the central figure, Mata Hari, in becoming an independent woman. The Spy by Paulo Coelho is a biography of Mata Hari, the famous erotic dancer and courtesan who was executed for espionage during World War I. Mata Hari was accused of selling military secrets to the Germans. The novel is written as a letter from Mata Hari to her lawyer while in prison. Mata Hari, whose real name was Margaretha Zelle, was born in Leeuwarden. She was from a Dutch family. Due to domestic issues, her parents sent her away to school in another city, Leiden. She married a Dutch army officer named Rudolf Macleod and moved to Java, where she suffered abuse by her husband and eventually returned to Europe. She transformed into Mata Hari in Paris, representing herself as a Javanese princess trained in sacred dance. Her performances and mysterious persona made her a sensation among Europe's elite, granting her access to powerful men in political and military circles. Her frequent journeys and relationships with men from different countries attracted suspicion during World War I. Both the French and the Germans approached her for espionage, and she became embroiled in a dangerous game. Despite weak evidence, the French arrested her in 1917, accusing her of being a German double agent. Her trial was more of a political theatre than a fair judicial process, and she was ultimately convicted and executed by a firing squad.*

Keywords: The Spy, Paulo Coelho, Mata Hari, Quest for Truth

Introduction

The Spy is a novel by Paulo Coelho, published in 2016. Mata Hari, named Margarethe Geertruida Zelle, was a young girl born in Leeuwarden. Due to some issues, her parents sent her away to school in another city, Leiden. She was raped by her school principal, when she was sixteen. She married Rudolf Macleod, a Dutch officer in the Scottish army. Her husband was a possessive person. He treated her badly. She was raped, tortured and abused by her husband. She decides to leave her husband and

go to Paris. But upon arriving in Paris, she was affected by the vibrant life and modernity of the city. Her launching dance at Monsieur Guimet's private museum caught the audience's attention. Stripped down to veils, she connected with the audience, transcending mere physicality in her performance. The audience's tremendous applause left her empowered and set her up for new chances. Madame Guimet, who became a dominant figure in Mata Hari's life, warned her to steer clear of love, which she saw as a menacing distraction. Her performances, which transformed erotic dance into a form of art,

brought her both admiration and scorn. While she enjoyed the advantage of high society, she also tackled her diminishing importance and the impact of age on a dancer's career. Mata Hari reminisced about her trip on a train to Berlin amidst the escalating turmoil of World War I. With doubts about her future, she recalled being a young woman, perhaps around twenty years old, feeling out of place as she rode through Germany, surrounded by troops preparing for war. She felt exposed and different from the other women on the train because she was chosen not for relationships that only pretended to be safe. She was accosted by a man named Franz Olav on her way, who expressed concern for her safety. He talked to Mata Hari and offered her money, suggesting that she escape to her Homeland. He confessed one-sided love for her and revealed the intricate motivation behind his role in bringing her to Germany. Despite his affection, she remains cautious of his motives and the implications of being used as a spy. Kramer offered her money and his proposal caught Mata Hari off guard. She accepted the money and agreed to act as a spy. However, she also tried to work for French intelligence to solve her financial problems and clear her name. But the French did not trust her because her actions seemed suspicious. Eventually, the French intercepted a secret message from a German official that clearly stated Mata Hari was a spy. Because of this, she was arrested, put on trial and executed in 1917.

Paulo Coelho is a Brazilian author known for his thought-provoking and philosophical novels, born on August 24, 1947 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He initially studies law but later drops out to pursue a career in the arts. Before turning to writing, he worked as a theatre director, actor, lyricist, and journalist. Coelho has written numerous books, including *The Alchemist* and *Veronika Decides to Die*. The study explores, 'In what ways was Mata Hari objectified and exploited by men in her life?' and 'How does *The Spy* reflect or challenge traditional gender roles and social norms for women in the early 20th century?'

Literature Review

In the case of a study of various authors' literary

work, who worked on this novel. In their work, Eka Noviyanti, Amrin Saragih and Muhammad Natsir (2020) applied Maslow's (1987) theory to examine women's struggles and how the main character tries to meet her needs. They found five different types of struggles: the fight for independence, the fight for love and relationships, the fight for dreams and desires, the fight for survival, and the fight for reputation. Mata Hari's struggles can be comprehended in three ways: exchanging sex for favours and money, engaging in relationships with upper-class men, and serving as a spy. They argued that Mata Hari's struggle, determination, and movement to achieve or fulfil their desires and needs. At that time, Mata Hari advocated for equal opportunities to express ideas, choices, relationships, and public statements.

According to Ardhiana (2018), when Mata Hari resided in Paris during World War I in 1917, *The Spy* represented the rebellion of Margarethe Zelle," Margarethe's rebellion against her responsibilities as a wife, operative, and female member of the community is captured in this book". She argues that Margarethe understands her life is also in danger after Andrea's wife commits suicide. She escaped from Paris, and this revolt is inevitable because it was a period when women were silenced and prohibited from taking action. The main character, Margarethe Zelle, describes the values of feminism. She stands for herself and accepts all the punishment and faces her death courageously.

Roy and Nilesh (2017) in "History: Mata Hari and Madeleine Noor" compare Mata Hari with Noor. She must be driven to rebellion because her revolt occurs when women are not allowed to express themselves or engage with society; she escapes to Paris, engaging in behaviours that make them seem feminine. Both women were beautiful and approached every project with high expectations. Paris was significant to both of them. Mata Hari and Noor had exceptional artistic ability; Margarethe was a dancer and Noor a musician, storyteller, and poet. Despite the absence of incriminating evidence, both women were killed on charges of spying; France executed Margarethe for acting as a German spy,

while Germany executed Noor for acting as a French spy. Both were polyglots, and their ability to speak several languages was their tremendous asset and, in a way, marked them out during the war.

In their work, Aiman Naeem and Mehran Ali (2023) both stated that Mata Hari's character should be explained as a new woman who would do everything to realize her ambitions and protect her interests in a patriarchal society in which she is methodically oppressed and ultimately put to death. They noted, nevertheless, that Mata Hari displayed New Woman characteristics in her strong opposition to oppression and discrimination. Mata Hari is on a mission to reveal the immoral and disproportionate way men think. Women cannot hold the same roles as men since men are 'subjects' while women are 'objects'.

According to Dyan Nur Ayni (2018), from a feminist standpoint, the research aims to examine women's oppression in Paulo Coelho's novel *The Spy*. The novel illustrates women's subjugation through their place in society, rights, function, and involvement. The novel identifies five signs of women's oppression, including being a sexual victim, being subjected to domestic abuse, feeling powerless, being sexually harassed, and being the target of wartime slander. According to Ayni, she has very little freedom to follow her wishes. Even if he forbids her from going anywhere, she must follow all of his instructions. She satisfies her husband's sexual desires and cares for her children. Mata Hari also often received violent treatment from her husband during the marriage. Ayni argued that Mata Hari faced oppression during her time in many cases. Being subjected to domestic violence refers to the experience of being mistreated by one's spouse throughout the marriage. "Powerlessness refers to the struggle to face many injustices in life, but there is no power to fight it."

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

The Spy by Paulo Coelho explore the themes of feminism, existentialism and historical biographical fiction, through the real-life story

of Mata Hari, an exotic dancer and courtesan executed for espionage during World War I. Through a feminist perspective, the book highlights how Mara Hari's freedom and sensuality were criticized in a male-dominated society and how the patriarchal systems want to suppress her. It shows her struggles with identity, freedom and the consequences of her choices.

The study is based on the qualitative approach. This research centres on the feminist analysis of Paulo Coelho's novel "The Spy". In this study, there are two data sources: primary and secondary data sources. The primary data source is the novel itself. The secondary data sources are articles, websites and other sources related to this research. The study explores textual analysis of the novel as a primary way to serve themes such as gender, identity, power, female subjugation, societal pressure, female agency and historical representation. The novel *The Spy* is studied through the lens of feminist literary theory. It analyses how Coelho rebuilds Mata Hari's life through an epistolary format and how Mata Hari challenges or conforms to societal expectations of women in a patriarchal society. This Methodology empowers a more profound understanding of how fiction can reform historical memories and influence reader perception.

Analysis

i. Suppression:

Mata Hari experiences oppression in her life. She was raped, when she was sixteen, by her school principal and was not supposed to tell anyone, It highlights the tendencies of patriarchal society to blame the women, regardless of whether they or wrong or not.

"From what I could tell, it had already happened to two of them, but to whom could we complain? We risked being expelled from school and sent back home, unable to explain the reason. So we were forced to keep quiet. My solace was knowing I wasn't the only one." (Coelho, p.18)

She was raped but she was not allowed to tell anyone. Not just her, but it had already happened to two others. "One is not born, but rather

becomes, a woman” as stated in Simone de Beauvoir’s book “The Second Sex”(1949). Women are not born; society teaches them to remain silent instead of protesting against crimes.

She remembers her distant husband, always encircled by female admirers. Their relationship is based on control and possession, rather than love or respect. As she gains fame, her decisions as a performer and independent woman further justify judgment against her.

Zainab Ansari was a victim of child sexual abuse and murder in Pakistan. It explains how patriarchal norms contribute to the devaluation of women and children and create a culture of silence due to fear of honor and social shame.

“I am a woman who was born at the wrong time and nothing can be done to fix this. I don’t know if the future will remember me, but if it does, may it never see me as a victim, but as someone who moved forward with courage, fearlessly paying the price she had to pay.” (Coelho, p.15)

She wants to be an independent woman but she was born in an unfair time when no one could change. Society suppresses her independence, pushing her to venture out of traditional female roles. She isn’t sure whether people will remember her in the future, but if people do remember, she was not weak or helpless; instead, she was a brave woman. *“The crimes I did commit, I escaped, the greatest of which was being an emancipated and independent woman in a world ruled by men”* (Coelho, p.14). In the eyes of society, Mata Hari’s mistake was her independence and defiance of patriarchal norms. She says it is a crime to be a self-sufficient and strong woman in society.

ii. Empowerment:

Her empowerment starts with her transformation. When she decided to go to Paris, she became an oriental dancer. *“I do not know who that woman is. All my life I’ve thought and acted like Mata Hari, the woman who has been and always will be the fascination of men and the envy of women”* (Coelho, p.35). Mata Hari no longer recognizes the woman she once was; she has transformed. She describes how she

arrived in Paris penniless and with no wardrobe, yet through confidence, she rose to fame and became an erotic dancer. She achieves freedom and a strong voice through dance. *“I am going to dance. I am going to remember every musical note and move my body to the rhythm, because it shows me who I am—a free woman”* (Coelho, p.57). Mata Hari is determined to remain true to herself and deeply connected to the art. She sees herself as unbound by societal expectations, at a time when women were judged for independence. Dance is the medium for her self-expression. She is a woman who celebrates her freedom and uses dance as a powerful form of expression. *“Even the tallest trees are able to grow from tiny seeds like these. Remember this, and try not to rush time”* (Coelho, p.17). Mata Hari’s journey from struggling woman to a world-famous dancer. It encourages that even successful people begin from something small; forcing or hurrying life does not improve things.

iii. Patriarchy:

From the start, she is bound by societal norms. When she was sixteen, she was raped by her school principal, but she was not supposed to tell anyone due to fear of honor and social shame. This explains how societal norms contribute to creating a culture of silence. Men can do whatever they want, but it is not permissible for women to speak out or raise their voices against harassment, sexual assaults and other issues due to the fear of honor.

Mata Hari decides to marry Rudolph Macleod, but after marriage, her life changed totally. She was raped and abused by her husband, who was a possessive person. Coelho illustrates how patriarchy challenges women not only at the level of personal relationship but also at the level of public opinions. A First year student of the Punjab Group of Colleges, Gulberg campus in Lahore, Pakistan, was raped by a security guard on the premises of the campus on October 11, 2024. *“The crimes I did commit, I escaped, the greatest of which was being an emancipated and independent woman in a world ruled by men”* (Coelho, p.14). In a patriarchal society, women are expected to conform to traditional roles that prioritize male dominance. An empowered woman is seen as threatening and suspicious in

a male-dominated world. Mata Hari didn't conform to societal expectations and it was her crime. In a male-dominated society, only men can hold power and authority. Mata Hari's downfall results from a male-dominated society that cannot tolerate an independent woman. She was sentenced to death, not because of solid evidence, but due to suspicion, because she was an independent woman, a foreigner, sexually liberated; therefore, she became an easy scapegoat. During World War I, such independence was seen as dangerous for women. Through the life of Mata Hari, Coelho reveals the brutality of a society where being an independent woman is considered more of a sin than being a spy.

Aafia Siddiqui was portrayed as either a kind and educated mother or a dangerous terrorist. The evidence against her came from secret files, especially against women who challenge them. Her trials were not open or vivid, showing how patriarchal systems try to control and silence such women. This reflects how patriarchal society tries to control women who don't conform.

Conclusion

In *The Spy*, Coelho tells the story of Mata Hari to explore how a woman's quest for self-discovery and independence can conflict with societal expectations. Mata Hari's unique dancing style caused her body to become objectified, making her a plaything for male audiences. As a mistress, her relationships were marked by exploitation, in which men treated her as a transactional commodity utilizing her for their enjoyment, social standing, or knowledge. In order to make her the scapegoat for political benefit during her trial as an undercover agent, the male government successfully utilized her unconventional lifestyle. It turned her into a pawn in a wartime narrative. Coelho's *The Spy* depicts Mata Hari as an expression of independence through her radical self-reinvention, dropping her traditional background to become an exceptional dancer. She disobeyed early 20th-century societal norms by rejecting conventional female roles, pursuing a public career, and embracing financial autonomy and her sensuality. Her actions, such

as global journey and relationships on her own terms, spotlight her unwavering pursuit of freedom and agency, despite spying accusations, underscoring her refusal to be controlled or silenced. The novel highlights gender role discrimination. It shows the restricted options available to women, highlighting how Mata Hari initially pursued marriage for security and faced harsh criticism for her unusual lifestyle. The era's patriarchal power is highlighted by her ultimate vulnerability to male-dominated political institutions, which underscores the societal constraints she faced. By depicting Mata Hari as a potent symbol of independence, the novel often seeks to create a nuanced portrayal of her challenging circumstances.

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