

MATA HARI: A VICTIM OF PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY IN PAULO CEOLHO'S *THE SPY*

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Abstract

This research paper sheds light on the life of Margeret zella popularly known as Mata Hari. Paulo Ceolho has fictionalized a historical character. She was a real Dutch exotic dancer who existed around the time of the First World War. Amidst an era of chaos and confusion, a seductress like Mata Hari whom the author calls "the first feminist" (Paulo, *The Spy*) proves to be a perfect scapegoat in the hands of the nations at war. She is accused of being a double spy, working for the Germans but owing her loyalties to the French nation as well.

After escaping from a bad marriage with an Indonesian army captain, she came to Paris, to become an exotic Javanese dancer, although she never knew any oriental form of dance yet she found pleasure in doing something which was quiet inappropriate for her times. A beautiful woman, a *Femme Fatale*, Mata Hari had her clients from the upper class of the society and army which made her all the more vulnerable of being looked on as a spy, leaking military secrets to foreign nations. In the beginning of the novel we meet Mata Hari standing before a firing squad, her fate has already been sealed; Paulo Coelho starts her story in the flashback technique viz-a-viz the letters she used to send to her lawyer. This paper examines the life of Mata Hari from a feminist perspective and brings out the strain of unapologetic woman in her.

Keywords: unapologetic, Feminist, Woman, *Femme Fatale*, spy.

Introduction:

Women throughout ages have been living with "sorry syndrome," (Ali. "Women and the 'Sorry syndrome'." *Sleepoverz*) thus they may be referred to as the most "apologetic gender,"(Healy, Katie . "Women and the Sorry Syndrome ." *Lake Views*, 19 Nov. 2015, Accessed 20 May 2017) as saying sorry tirelessly seems to be their habit. Sometimes women are sorry even for being born. A fetus when discovered to be that of a girl is killed mercilessly in the womb. Even if the fetus survives, it survives only to become "the other" (Beauvoir 262) in the society living by the rules laid down by the patriarchy. Time and again she is made to feel that she has no brain of her own and that she cannot take her own decisions. In other words, she is thought to be less rational and more emotive. But there is no truth in saying that women are inherently meek, docile, submissive, and dependent. If we put a male child and a female child in a single room and

provide them the same environment and the same learning, then one won't differ from the other. A male child will find nothing wrong in playing with dolls and a female child won't find it strange to play with a bat and ball. In other words, sex is biologically determined but gender is a social construct as Judith Butler had said: "Masculine and feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed" (Butler, Performance and Performativity). We are what society makes of us; in the case of a girl child, she is female by sex but becomes a woman through the process of gendering and in this process, the society, the educational institutions and religion play a crucial part. They construct her in such a way that the sole objective of her life becomes to please men. But exceptions are always there; there have been women who have dared to defy the convention but for this, they have paid a very heavy price. One such woman is Mata Hari whom the author Paulo Coelho discusses in the novel "The Spy." Mata Hari deconstructs the myth of compliant woman as the author reports her saying that "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."

"The First World War was fought not only on the battlefields and in the ammunition factories, it was also the scene of a large-scale secret war in which the various belligerents engaged through their intelligence services" (Debruyne, Emmanul . "Espionage." International Encyclopedia of the First World War, 8 Oct. 2014). The environment of the First World War was chaotic and a people travelling constantly between international borders were seen with suspicion. Mata Hari was doubly suspected; one because she was a female travelling extensively between international borders, the other being her profession. Her profession was that of a dancer but it involved a certain degree of prostitution as well. Many high profile officials including people from the army were her guests for the night. The First World War politics involved in framing her as a spy was all handled by men in power and her sexuality had made this issue all the more political and sensitive. This is because men of any age cannot bear the sight of a more advanced woman as the lawyer of Mata Hari says:

You were a victim for the sin of being a woman, for the greater sin of being free, for the immense sin of stripping in public, for the dangerous sin of getting involved with men whose reputation needed to be maintained at any cost. This would only be possible if you disappeared forever from France or the world. (Coelho 168)

In these words her lawyer clearly mentions that her biggest crime was not her profession or her involvement in espionage but her gender. During the time of the First World War, women were given jobs in place of men who were at war, but it was already decided that they will be kicked out of those jobs when the men will come back. This is because women had acquired no right to profession as they were considered inferior to men in every respect. ("Life On the German Home Front during the First World War examined for Centenary News: How did German Society adapt." Centenary News, 22 Apr. 2013. Accessed 20 May 2017)

In such an era Mata Hari gave way to her passion for dancing which for her was a way for spiritual communion as she says, "When I was onstage I simply forgot about the woman I was and offered everything to God. That is why I was able to undress so easily. At that moment, I was nothing, not even my body. I was just movements communing with the universe." (Coelho 57). For the audience of her times her dance was mere stripping of clothes but for her own self it was giving vent to her own form of art, it was a fresh breath of air after her broken marriage with

an alcoholic husband. In fact one of the main reasons for her early disappointments from her marriage was the shattering of her prince charming dreams as in one of the lines she says: "There was my salvation! Officer. Indonesia. Strange seas and exotic worlds."(Coelho 22). Within the contract of marriage most women have great expectations that they will be treated with dignity but as soon as they enter the so-called great institution of marriage they see that most of the work they do goes uncompensated, they become an object of pleasure and a piece of property for their husbands and are no better than a piece of furniture in the house of their husband. They were sex-objects and were never prioritized beyond this. At one point of time, Mata Hari says that "I concealed the scratches and bruises under extra makeup, but I wasn't fooling anyone" (Coelho 26). This goes on to show that she was beaten by her husband. Not only were the wives of elite army officials beaten but even the women belonging to lower strata of the society received no better treatment; in one of the early chapters it is said that:

"I fell pregnant again, I enjoyed a few days of immense happiness caring for my son, but he was soon poisoned by one of his nannies, who never even had the opportunity to explain her actions, the other servants killed her the same day the baby was found dead. In the end, most said it was deserved retaliation, as the nanny had been constantly beaten, raped, and burdened by endless working hours"(Coelho 26-27)

The nanny belongs to the lower strata of the society she is paid meagerly as compared to men and yet the condition of the times was such that even she was raped and beaten. The psychological consequences of such atrocities committed upon women were immense: "When someone is a victim of sexual violence, it affects not only the survivor, but also the people around them. Sexual violence can affect many people in a victim/survivor's life: parents, friends, partners, children, spouses, classmates and/or co-workers."("Effects of Sexual Violence." Rape Victim Advocates. Accessed 21 May 2017.). Not only the nanny but our protagonist herself is also a rape victim : "All the men I've known have given me joy, jewelry or a place in society, and I've never regretted knowing them except the first, the school principal who raped me when I was sixteen" (Coelho 22). A pedophilic school principal rapes her, the person who is supposed to protect children and take care of the entire institution, falls so much from his dignity that he rapes a sixteen year old girl. Again the psychological consequences of this incident were so great in Mata Hari (that time Margaret Ella) that she began to think of sex as something very mechanical that had nothing to do with love. Whether you love a person or not or you just know him from somewhere or even if he is a stranger, love-making is allowed to you because it involves no emotions: "From that experience, I began to associate sex with something mechanical, something that had nothing to do with love." (Coelho 21). This factor goes on to define her future life of being a dancer-prostitute. Perhaps she would have never opted for such a profession had she lived a normal childhood. Early childhood experiences is very important in framing the future behavior of children. As far as our character, Mata Hari, is concerned, she too had a nightmarish childhood because of which she found nothing wrong with prostitution and thus got entrapped in the espionage case. In her ideology you cannot love a person because loving a person is giving up your own right over yourself. As Madame Guimet says it:

My first piece of advice is the hardest, and it has nothing to do with your performance. Never fall in love. Love is poison. Once you fall in love, you lose control over your life- your heart and mind belong to someone else.

Your existence is threatened. You start to do everything to hold on to your loved one and lose all sense of danger. Love, that inexplicable and dangerous thing, sweeps everything you are from the face of the earth and, in its place, leaves only what your beloved wants you to be. (Coelho 63)

Love for a woman turns out to be a scary experience because she is no longer the owner of her own body. It is a male who exercises control over her body and makes her soul feel the wrath implicated on her body. As in the Hindu mythology, a man who happens to be your husband has been given the status of Pati-permeshwar; no matter what he does to you, he is your God, and your condition is your fate for which you cannot blame anyone. According to Colette Guillaumin, women's sexual obligation to men occurs both in marriage and in prostitution. For Guillaumin, the primary difference between the two is that time limits are placed on a man's use of prostitutes, and he must pay for the specific acts he wants. As far as our protagonist is concerned she had already escaped the tyrannies of marriage and now for the act of love-making she was charging money and gifts. This was her way of earning money and living in a world but her ways proved to be dangerous for her because she couldn't escape patriarchy in all. All she wanted was to be a free woman but the men's world was not ready to grant this freedom so easily so she died for the same cause:

Do you know what I am going to do now, before I hear the footsteps in the corridor and the arrival of my breakfast? I am going to 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 105).

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