

Mata Hari as a New Woman in Paul Coelho's Novel *The Spy*: Magnifying Hari's Subjugation Through A Feminist Lens

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Abstract

*This study aims to analyze the character of Mata Hari as a new woman, who goes to any extent to safeguard her desires and to materialize her dreams in a patriarchal society, where she is systematically kept oppressed and is at last executed. However, she strongly resists discrimination and oppression by demonstrating the traits of a new woman. This study analyzes Hari's character from a feminist perspective and magnifies her strong resistance against subjugation. The study uses textual analysis via a qualitative method to explore the newness in Mata Hari's character. The finding reveals Mata Hari in *The Spy* is an unusual, powerful, courageous, sensational, free-sighted, and independent woman who dares to defy the conventions of her times. She is not presented as a dependent, weak, and passive woman, as women used to be in her time. She is found as a woman of great charisma and an influential feminine figure.*

Keywords: *Feminism, Mata Hari, New Woman, Women Subjugation.*

1.1 Introduction

Women's subjugation and denial of their rights by a male dominated mind-set is the same old story. Human history bears witness to the fact that whenever there is a question of equal rights for women; unprecedented male chauvinism is shown in the denial of rights. Even in our contemporary modern world where concepts have undergone through drastic changes, the same prejudice prevails. The Novel under study is based on the same theme of women oppression and subjugation.

Paul Coelho's novel *The Spy* is set in Paris, October 15, 1917. It was an age when industrial revolution gained momentum, but at the same time

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created discrimination based on gender and class. Men and women were not only assigned different roles, but they were also considered to have different natures. Women were considered weak, passive, timid, emotional, illogical and dependent. Society was male dominated, and women were not allowed to go outside. They had to remain at home, take care of children and do household chores. They were expected to be subservient to their male members. Employment and educational opportunities were limited for them; if they were allowed to work, they were paid very low than their male counterparts. They were not given the right to hold property. Women were considered to wear long dresses. However, Mata Hari, actually known as Margaretha Zelle in the Novel, demonstrates behavior that do not subscribe to the man-established norms and discriminatory standards set by that society for women.

The novel under study narrates the painful story of Mata Hari when she is just 16 years old, her school principal rapes her and it becomes one of the most disgusting experiences that she ever had. It badly affects her life. To divert the attention of society, and escape the memories, she marries a Dutch officer, Rudolf. However, her marriage turns out to be the worst experience for her. She is dehumanized, raped, beaten, abused, and objectified by her husband. He treats her no less than a whore. She realizes that it is impossible for her to flee and return home and that she will be forced to spend months there alone. One day she takes a bold step. She decides to leave her husband and moves to Paris where she becomes a well-known dancer out of her interest in dancing. She desires to be herself and does everything that she desires. She seeks the most wealthy and influential men of that time to meet her desires. Sadly, the men she deals with trap her and manipulate her. She becomes a victim of the impending world war. She is sentenced to death after being accused of being a spy of German. Her life is full of suffering, pain, and oppression, yet she is powerful, courageous, brave, and an unconventional woman of the time who sacrifices her life just to liberate herself from the oppression and to change men's perspective.

1.2 Purpose and Significance of the Paper:

The main purpose of this study is to show Mata Hari as a 'New Woman' in Paulo Coelho's *The Spy* who struggles for her existence in a patriarchal society with all her potential, and she is not like a conventional woman who passively bears the oppression and subjugation at the hands of a man.

This paper is significant as it will enrich readers' understanding of the text, and will provide them a new insight to look at the character of Mata Hari from a different angle where she is portrayed as a strong voice against patriarchy and male chauvinism. The findings from textual analysis will contribute to the existing body of knowledge regarding this novel.

1.3 Methodology:

The present study has used a descriptive qualitative method of research. The descriptive qualitative research approach suits best for this study as, qualitative descriptive research generates data that describe the 'who, what, and where of events or experiences' in detail (Kim et al., 2017, p. 23). It, therefore, helps in generating a comprehensive and in-depth picture of the scenario. As far as sources for analysis are concerned, two types of data sources are used for this study. The primary source is the actual text of the Novel *The Spy* comprising 206 pages. It utilizes words, sentences, and phrases in the text of the novel. The secondary sources of the research are previous research articles, research papers, and books. The technique used for data analysis is a content analysis of the novel using a feminist lens.

2. Literature Review:

The word “feminism” comes from the French word “feminize” coined by the Utopian socialist Charles Fourier. It was first used in England in the 1890s.” “The Feminism protest against legal, economic, and social restrictions on the basic rights of women” (Showalter, 1999).

Feminism is basically an important belief that is based on the equality of both females and males with respect to education, employment, and the choice of marriage. Feminism can also be taken as a cultural or economic and political movement with the goal to establish the rights and legal protection of women based on equality (Rampton, 2008). Apart from the fact that feminism as a movement did not gain its due fame and popularity till 1970, it was in use from quite earlier in the public. In the movie of 1942, *Women of the Year*, a lady, Katherine Hepburn talks about the movement.

The history of feminism can be divided into three waves. The First wave of feminism sheds light on Women's suffrage and the legal rights of contract and property as being practiced by males in a patriarchal society. Mary Wollstonecraft, an English Feminist, wrote an essay in 1792, “*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*” which is considered as the first treatise of feminism.

In her treatise *Mary Wollstonecraft* protests against the exploitation of women in the household chores and the carelessness to give education and self-determination to women. In England, the famous first-wave feminists were Barbara Bodichon, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Lydia Becker. The second wave of feminism was a continuation of the early wave of feminism which sought legal, social, cultural, and political rights in the United Kingdom and the United States. Second-wave feminism projects women's cultural and political inequalities. Besides the socioeconomic transformations and considerations, it touched on cultural attitudes (especially concerning women's work and men's attitudes towards women) and legal precedents that still reinforced sexual inequalities (Rampton, 2008).

The third wave of feminism arose in response to the failure of the second wave of feminism as it is closely related to the liberation ideas of an individual and the personal or private dependability of men and women. It was to project what was the duty of men as men and women as women to remove all the shackles of patriarchy in case of women's subjugation. The basic motive behind this wave was to protect the rights and freedom of women more intensely as the previous two waves did not give the expected output regarding women's liberation in a patriarchal society. Third-wave feminism seeks to challenge the second-wave's essentialist definitions of femininity, which (according to them) overemphasize the experiences of upper-middle-class and elite-class women.

Now if we look into Mata Hari according to the setting of the novel i.e. 1917, it is the time when the first wave of feminism is at its peak and the second wave has not yet started. Mata Hari in a sense is a precursor of the second wave of feminism. She is struggling for her legal rights and independence. She can foresee and trace the consequences of feminism and the price which the feminists had to pay ultimately.

Setyarini (2016) argues that Hari's early life is ordinary; but it drastically changes when she is treated unfairly by her husband. "Mata Hari's life journey looked rationality as a form of prison for individual freedom, and individual freedom to actualize themselves based on the wishes and values by themselves, not based on the exits rules in a group or ruler" (Setyarini, 2016, p. 5). She wants to live her life according to her desires without considering the beliefs and norms of society. She, throughout her life, struggles for her liberation and shows her existence through her own unique

choices; she is brave enough to think differently and make choices for her own life.

Traditionally, a woman is constructed as an object of carnal enjoyment, only to please men. But there are some exceptions. Qadri (2017) in her thesis, “Mata Hari: A Victim of Patriarchal Society in Paulo Coelho’s *The Spy*” explains that Mata Hari is one of those who dare to defy the conventions. But for this she pays a heavy price: “She is doubly suspected; one because she was a female traveling extensively between international borders, the other being her profession” (Qadri, 2017, p. 678). Her lawyer explains the reason for her execution and that her biggest crime is her gender. She argues that the institution of marriage is a kind of disappointment for females. Women are considered as sex-objects and never prioritized beyond this. Not only women of the elite class but also of lower strata of society are treated badly. Nanny belongs to the lower strata; she is being raped and beaten. Our protagonist is also a rape victim. She cannot escape patriarchy at all, and she dies for the same reason.

Ardhiana (2018) remarks on the life of Mata Hari: “*The Spy* represented the rebellion of Margarethe Zelle when lived in World War I in 1917. This novel represents Margarethe’s rebellion in life as a woman, a spy, and a housewife” (Ardhiana, 2018, p. 3). She argues that Margarethe, after the suicide of Andrea’s wife, realizes that her life is also under severe pressure. She rebels by running away to Paris and this rebellion is inevitable, as it was the time when women were not allowed to speak up and do something that make women become feminine. “The main character Margarethe Zella describes the values of feminism. She stands for herself and accepts all the punishment and faces her death courageously” (Ardhiana, 2018, p.7).

Roy and Nilesh (2017) in “History/Herstory: Mata Hari and Madeleine Noor” compare Mata Hari with Noor. Both women were beautiful and whatever they did they accomplished with the highest standard. Paris mattered to both. Margarethe and Noor “both had exemplary artistic talent; Margarethe was a dancer and Noor a musician, story-writer, and poet” (Roy & Nilesh, 2017, p. 11). Both were executed for the charges of espionage without any incriminating evidence; Margarethe was killed by France for being a German spy while Noor was killed by Germany for being a British spy. “Both were polyglots and their abilities to speak multiple languages were their great assets and, in a way, marked them out during the war” (Roy & Nilesh, 2017, p. 10).

3. Discussion and Analysis

This section discusses and analyzes Mata Hari's character by showing the elements of subjugation that make her life, choices, and existence a hectic struggle in the male dominant society. Next, it shows how Mata Hari demonstrates newness in her character and personality that makes her struggle a journey of courage, bravery, optimism, and perseverance.

3.1 The Elements of Subjugation in the Novel

Paulo Coelho highlights women's subjugation and gender inequality in the Victorian era throughout the story in *The Spy*. The novel unveils a social malpractice: the subjugation of women. The discussion and analysis in the section expose the inferior position of woman as compared to man; the way woman is considered as alien and the 'Other'. It explains the Simon de Beauvoir concept of a woman that woman is being considered as 'other' and treated as an object, rejected and subjugated self. This concept of otherness is basically defined and explained by men who define and construct women. Man considers himself as subject and superior (De Beauvoir, 2011).

3.2 Women as Dependent and Secondary Men

Mata Hari faces her execution. She could do nothing to save her life as it is ordained by men. She could not survive independently in society which is why she had to die. She is considered an 'other' and subjugated being. She once appeals for clemency, but it is denied which shows the intolerance of men towards an independent woman. Mata Hari knows this thing that is why she does not appeal for clemency once it has been denied. As it is quite clear in the text, "She remained serene when she learned her appeal for clemency, made days earlier to the president of the republic, has been denied" (Coelho, 2016, p. 4).

Paulo Coelho wants to depict the nature of society in which women are always given secondary roles and places in society. Women cannot desire a thing: authority, power, and money which are designed for men. If a woman does so she is punished harshly. Mata Hari wants to know the reason for this immoral and unbalanced attitude of men. Women cannot get the position of men because men are 'subjects', and women are 'objects'.

This point is made clearer by the text that follows: "By that time, my name will have been long forgotten. But I am not writing to be remembered. I am

attempting to understand things myself. Why? How is it that a woman who for so many years got everything she wanted can be condemned to death for so little?" (Coelho, 2006, p. 13).

3.3 Mata Hari to Remain Submissive to Men for Her Survival

When Mata Hari is about to leave for a boarding school, her mother gives her a packet of tulip seeds. Her mother's advice basically reflects the typical mentality of society. She wants to convey the message that the life of a woman is like a tulip seed. Tulip seeds will always remain tulips; they will never turn into something else. Even if they desire to turn into roses or sunflowers, they cannot turn into them. As a tulip seed, a woman will always remain a woman, submissive and oppressed. If a woman desires to be something different she cannot turn into it. If a woman tries to challenge her submissive position in society, she will live a bitter life. A woman has to follow her own destiny that is being shaped by men and a woman has to accept it. But if she renounces her destiny, she will face death. Women cannot go beyond it. This shows that women's life and destiny is being shaped by men as men are traditionally superior and dominant. Beauvoir's concept of otherness is very relevant in the following lines:

They're tulip seeds, the symbol of our country. But, more than that, they represent a truth you must learn. These seeds will always be tulips, even if at the moment you cannot tell them apart from other flowers, no matter how much they might desire to. And if they try to deny their own existence, they will live life bitter and die. So, you must learn to follow your destiny, whatever it may be, with joy. As flowers grow, they show off their beauty and are appreciated by all; then, after they die, they leave their seeds so that others may continue God's work (Coelho, 2006, p. 18).

3.4 Mata Hai as an Object of Sexual Amusement:

Mata is treated as an object and source of sexual enjoyment. She is raped by her principal when she is in boarding school when she is just 16 years of age. Not only Mata is raped by the principal but also by other girls in the school. She does not narrate this to anyone because she knows the voice of women is always suppressed by society especially when this voice is raised against men. She can foresee her troubles and sufferings in the future if she narrates this to someone. This fact makes her silent. This is where we see the injustices sometimes in the name of honor or other considerations. Coelho is very particular about all this.

Mata Hari mentions the troubles she has to suffer if she does complain about the principal to someone, "I left his office confused and frightened, determined not to tell anyone what had happened until another girl brought it up when we were talking in a group. From what I could tell, it has 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" (Coelho, 2006, p. 21).

4. Mata Hari as a New Woman:

Women's oppression and denial of their rights by a male-dominated mindset is the same old story. Human history is witness to the fact that whenever there is a question of equal rights for women unprecedented male chauvinism is shown in the denial of rights. Even in our contemporary modern world where concepts have undergone drastic changes, the same prejudice prevails. However, Mata Hari demonstrates unconventional and modern traits in her personality that distinguishes her as a new woman.

4.1 Mata Hari as an Unconventional Woman of the Time:

Mata thinks that she is a woman who is born at the wrong time. It is the time and society of men. Mata learns that there is no place for an independent woman who moves forward with courage and gallantry. Those women who try to transcend beyond time are punished brutally. Coelho, through this novel, wants to appeal for public sympathy to stop the abuse and killing of women. He also shows the mindset of people toward a patriarchal society in the 20th century. Mata wants to break this convention for which she knows she has to pay a heavy price. She mentions this in her letters as follows:

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 move forward with courage, fearlessly paying the price she had to pay (Coelho, 2006, p. 1).

4.2 Mata Hari as an Educated Woman

Education is the prime right of each and every individual whether male or female. In the twentieth century mostly, women are not allowed to go to school and get an education. Mata is different from the rest of the women in the sense that she not only attends school but also studies dance which is against the conventions of society. She even attends lessons on riding horses. Mata is even sent to a boarding school in another city, Leiden, in order to get

a first-class education. As Mata writes, “They did not want me to have to go through what they went through, and sent me away to school in another city, Leiden, firm in their objective that I have the finest education” (Coelho, 2006, p. 18). Coelho wants to convey the message that women must get equal education and that they are not less than men.

Education is the first right that must be given to every woman as it is the most powerful tool for empowering them. Education enables women to fight for and protect their rights.

4.3 Mata Hari as a new woman in Terms of Making Choices

Women in the 20th century are not allowed to marry by their own choice. They are not given the right to get married to whom they want. It is only the right of men to marry women of their own choice. Women must marry according to the will and choice of their family. But Mata is different. She has the courage to marry the person of her choice. She reads an ad in the newspaper which she likes and answers. She arranges many meetings with him and at last accepts his proposal. She writes as follows:

“One day out of boredom, I began reading the classified ads in the newspaper of a neighboring town. And there it was: Rudolf MacLeod, an officer in the Dutch army of Scottish descent, currently stationed in Indonesia, seeks a young bride to get married and live abroad” (Coelho, 2006, p. 22).

Mata Hari answers the ad with her picture. This step shows that she is quite independent in taking her decisions irrespective of the conventions of society. This point can be made clearer from the extract of the text as follows: “There was my salvation! Officer. Indonesia. Strange seas and exotic worlds. Enough of conservatives, Calvinist Holland, full of prejudice and boredom. I answered the ad, enclosing the best and most sensual picture” (Coelho, 2006, p. 22).

4.4 Mata Hari as an Adventurous Lady:

Mata in the novel can be seen as an adventurous lady. She likes to do new experiences in life. She is a feminine figure who does not follow blindly social dictates. She wants to travel and interact with people of different origins. When Madame Guimet invites her to her husband’s museum where an artist of great fame is to come, she at once accepts the invitation. The

reason is not that she has an interest in the artist's gallery or museum; she only wants to meet different people. She writes as, "Of course, his intention is to try to sell me something, whereas my intention is to meet new and different people, to get outside a world that is beginning to bore me" (Coelho, 2006, p. 67).

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Her profession plays a great role in declaring her as a feminine figure. The nature of her profession describes her character as courageous and brave. She changes her real name for her profession from Margaretha Zelle to Mata Hari. This step of changing the name in itself is very courageous. Mata Hari wants to forget her past life associated with her name which had been dominated by men. She wants to start a new beginning of life with a new name and enthusiasm.

4.5 Mata Hari's Unusual Execution

The tragedy of Mata's life is that she is accused of a double spy though she never committed the crime of espionage. She is condemned to death not for being a spy but for her achievements and social position she had gotten in a society where these were considered heinous crimes. She mentions the reason of her execution and sufferings as, "And on behalf of that I've suffered unjustly, the humiliations I am forced to endure, the public defamation I suffered before the judges of the third War Council, and the lies on both sides--as if the Germans and the French, who are killing each other, couldn't leave a woman whose greatest sin was having a free mind ..." (Coelho, 2006, p. 137). Mata Hari's only sin is being an independent woman having a free mind and she pays the price with her life.

4.6 Mata Hari as a Fearless and Courageous Woman

Mata Hari is an impassive, optimistic, and fearless woman who faces her death and execution courageously. She does not die the way we see in movies. Her way of facing death is unusual. She is a real woman and wants to see the reality of life. She is fearless and shows no fear and grief in her death. She does not protest against her execution and prefers not to be blindfolded. She does not appeal for clemency once she learns that it has been denied. When she is about to be shot, she does not move a muscle. These traits differentiate Mata Hari from the rest of the women. The following extract from the text clarifies all this:

For a fraction of a second, Mata Hari remained upright. She did not die the way you see in moving pictures after people are shot. She did not plunge forward or backward, and she did not throw her arms up to the side. She collapsed onto herself, her head still up, her eyes still open (Coelho, 2006, p. 7).

5. Conclusion:

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After thorough textual analysis, it is evident that the status of women through the character of Mata Hari was quite oppressive at that time. However, Mata Hari resisted and questioned that system of oppression. She has been proven as a woman with a strong voice against male chauvinism. She is not a conventional woman that silently endures the illogical restrictions imposed by men. She is a new woman demonstrating persistence, struggles for her ambitions, and consistency in the male dominant society. She is an exotic dancer, and courtesan, and becomes famous overnight after her oriental and exotic dances. She is driven by her instincts, desires, and ambitions and resists the systematic oppression of men against women. She demonstrated the traits of a modern woman. Today we see that women are as productive as men in all fields of life. Women want a peaceful co-existence with their male counterparts; as such they demand recognition of their potential and social, political, and economic viability. They do not want to be taken for granted. Ignorantly men take all this as a threat to their social and political supremacy and consequently become offensive.

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