

## Execution! For the offence of being an Independent Woman: Desire for Self and Freedom in Paulo Coelho's *The Spy*

Steffi Santhana Mary. S

Research Scholar

The Research Department of English, The American College, Madurai

[sydneychristopher14@gmail.com](mailto:sydneychristopher14@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*Paulo Coelho, a Brazilian writer is one among the widely read and translated authors. Self is a relative abstract term that means different things to different writers like Emerson or Nadine Gardiner. Mata Hari, the protagonist of Coelho's The Spy desires for freedom, which leads to her execution. Women can be free but only within the norm which is set for them, without them. The researcher proposes to uncover the impulse of living on her own*

**Keywords:** Struggle, Dilemma, Self, Choice, free will.

The Spy is a historical fiction. It is a story of Mata Hari, a real woman who is convicted of espionage under

simultaneously insane and absurd terms.

Mata Hari was born as Margaretha Zelle to Adam and Antje Zelle. She had everything that money could buy. She was trained to become a kindergarten teacher. From her childhood, she always longed for an adventurous life, and for this very reason, she hastily married Rudolf, who is in Indonesia, even though she knew that he is a drunkard.

Indonesia was a never-ending nightmare for the eighteen-year-old Margaretha. Macleod showed his true color. He is a drunkard and proved to be an abusive and demanding man. "What should have been a source of joy for any woman –the birth of her children –would

become a nightmare for me." (A 24) He also had illicit affair with other Asian women. He torches her psychologically and physically. He was so cruel to poison his own child: "I fell pregnant again. I enjoyed few days of immense happiness caring for my son, but he was soon poisoned"(S 26) Mata Hari could not bear this planned murder. She divorced him and thought she is going to lead a happy and independent life after moving away from him.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* throws the spotlight on women fighting back to seek liberation economically, sexually and potentially from their position as the other. She rightly says that women can be free but only within the norms set for them without them. Likewise, Mata Hari thought that she can enjoy the freedom but it is constantly in the hands of man. In spite of all her efforts to live a free life, she was vulnerable to Men whom she trusted.

Mata Hari reinvents herself while dancing, she forgets the woman who she becomes. She offers everything to God. She feels nothing while dancing, not even her own body. The dance movements make her communicate with the universe. She feels complete while dancing. She went in search of an independent life with all excitement rather she found loneliness, suffering and a boring life.

The true sin in Mata Hari's life is not Prostitution, fame or spying (as she is accused), it is living so far totally removed from an absolute harmony. At a certain time, she doesn't know she is:"...how could I be true to myself if I didn't even know exactly who I am? The dancer who took Europe by storm? The housewife who humiliated herself in the Dutch East Indies? The lover of powerful men?" (S 113) She must have had real guts to change from Margaretha Zelle to Mata Hari and to act like another person whom she doesn't know: "I don't 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 fascinated by men and envy of women." (S 57)

On the whole Mata Hari is executed for being a feminine, independent woman. She says, "The crimes I did commit, I escaped, the greatest of which was being an emancipated and independent woman in a world ruled by men." (S 12) She leaves behind a boring life in Holland and enters a terrifying, brutal marriage to a soldier in the East Indies. After escaping from that, she decides to live her life on her own, she becomes an exotic dancer, prostitute, social climber and uses the passing men in her life to achieve her means. She enjoys dance, fashion and in the same way she also enjoys men. Through Coelho's words, we understand that she isn't very intelligent, and her number one motive is fame and high society. But to the men at war, this sort of behaviour is punishable

and she is punished by death. The choices she makes are her own and it is not imposed on her. In Coelho's hands, Mata Hari becomes an iconic figure for women who aspire to be free from communal living, so that they can make their way independently in the world.

### Works cited

- Bergoffen, Debra. "Simone de Beauvoir", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta. 2014. 12 Feb 2017. Web.
- Coelho, Paulo, Trans. Zoe Perry. The Spy. India: Penguin Random House, 2016. Print.