



# “Portrayal of War Politics in History: The New Historicist Interventions in Paulo Coelho’s *The Spy*.”

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## Abstract

Paulo Coelho is a renowned Brazilian Writer whose novels illustrate the meaning of life in terms of his view point based on his life experiences. He has a number of books to his credit and his novel *The Spy* is published in 2016. It has been translated from the Portuguese by

Zoe Perry. It deals with the encounter of the historical figure Margaretha Gertrude Zelle, who is famously known as Mata Hari. The incident takes place during the World War I. The epilogue of the book contains the report published in the newspaper on October 15, 1917 about her encounter. It clearly states that she has been executed on the charge of espionage.

In this novel, Coelho has used the history of an erotic dancer called Mata Hari as a background. He has presented it wrapped in the colourful cover of myth and fantasy. He has used imaginary and most probable conversations. The beginning of the story contains the 'Prologue' where the morning of the encounter is retold with a very detailed appearance of Mata Hari, her physical appearance, her mental stability, her death sentence. In the 'middle' the narrator, Mata Hari, in the first person gives a minute description of her adventurous life, her experiencing life, her understanding of human dignity. *The Spy* explores the war politics which takes place during the World War I in which an innocent woman is victimized as a spy. Coelho delves deep into the war politics between France and Germany.

**Key Words:**History,War Politics,Victimization,Spy,Myth,Fantasy.

Paulo Coelho is one of the most famous Brazilian writers of the contemporary literary world. He is hailed for his writings on life lessons in view of spirituality and mysticism. He inspires the readers with a deluge of positive references to miracles and positive endings. Since he loves to quote common human experiences, his novels are found with strong universal themes like the importance of love, the joy of fighting for one's dream, etc. He makes use of his characters as his mouthpiece to answer some of life's basic questions. His novels are based on his own experiences.

Coelho's novel *The Spy* is published in 2016. It is translated by Zoe Perry from the Portuguese. It delineates the encounter of the historical figure Margaretha Gertrude Zelle. She is famously known as Mata Hari. The incident takes place during the World War I. The epilogue of the novel carries a report published in the newspaper on October 15, 1917 about her encounter. It is clearly reported that she has been accused on the charge of espionage. Coelho delineates the life of Mata Hari through a letter written by her to her lawyer Mr. Clunet. She is a Dutch girl who is born in a middle class family in Holland. After her parents' separation she moves to live with her uncle to get training to become a teacher. One fine day, she replies to a matrimonial advertisement in the newspaper of an army man looking for a wife.

Within three months she gets married to him and goes to Indonesia. Rudolf is Mata Hari's husband who is an officer in the Dutch army of Scottish descent. He is twenty one years senior to her. She is sexually abused by her school principal during her teen age. Her life becomes tragic and she becomes a victim to sexual and physical abuse by her husband. She explains her plight very pathetically in the novel in many places.

MataHarifaces the firing squad in 1917.History has judged her execution as unfair and the most heinous crime.Historians, movie makers and writers have tried to understand who MargarethaZelle otherwise known as Mata Hari.

Mata Hari's death is reported in all the newspapers of Paris with a headline "Woman dancer shot by French as Spy"(Spy 182) on October 15,1917.Mata Hari has been riding high on the crest of success and she has enjoyed name and fame that her dance has given. At one point of her life she is desperate, disappointed and disinterested and as a result she decides to leave Paris in search of green pastures in life. She says in the novel, "I want to stop.I cannot continue this life. How much longer can I work as an actress and dancer?"(81).It is during the First World War time Mata Hari leaves for Germany. When the train rumbles into Germany, she sees soldiers marching towards the western border. There are battalions and more battalions, gigantic machine guns, and cannons pulled by horses.

Mata Hari goes to Germany to start her life as a dancer since her popularity has been waning in Paris.When she goes there she is guided by a man who has projected himself as an ardent fan of Mata Hari.MataHari's dance includes nudity but she believes that the nudity is meaningful in the context of the dance. She says, "When I got to the sixth veil,I went over to the Shiva statue ,stimulated an orgasm ,and cast myself to the ground while removing the seventh and final veil"( 59). She has lived a comfortable life not only because of the money she has earned through her dancing but also because she is willing to have affairs with powerful men .

Coelho has used the history of a Dutch erotic dancer as a background for this novel. Mata Hari is basically very innocent lady who is falsely accused a spy .She tries a lot to prove her innocence but she fails at the end.Even during the time of her death sentence she faces death very boldly even without a blindfold .The anger she has had for the world and how she is victimized in history has made her encounter the death sentence boldly. She thinks what else this country or the so called society can do against her after this.When women come out their families especially if they happen to be celebrities they are prone to more danger. Mata Hari is the best example for this.

Mata Hari's popularity starts waning in France as she becomes older and, therefore, she goes to Germany through a man called Franz Olav who promises her a new rise in popularity.MataHari's career does not flourish there because the German soldiers have shut down the performance halls and her benefactor is drafted into the army. Franz drives her to the train station so that she can return to Netherlands, a neutral country. He tells her that he is employed to request her whether she will act as a spy for Germany. She denies that she will not act as a spy. He gives her name to one of his friends named, Karl Kramer who is in the German consul in The Hague.Franz tells her that Kramer can help her get back to France but she should probably act as a spy. She goes to Germany in order to earn money but because of the war, she has to get out of the country.

When Mata Hari visits Kramer, he tries to recruit her as a spy. She says, "I said as much during that farce of a trial:"A prostitute,yes,A Spy ,never"(111).She goes immediately to Georges Ladoux who is the head of the counter espionage for the French but instead of being seen as a good citizen, she is marked for surveillance.Ladoux brings false charges against Mata Hari and makes her convicted of espionage.She is ordered to be killed by the firing squad.

The only thing she knows is that she is innocent. When she comes to know all about what is played behind her, she becomes depressed but she willingly hands herself over her fate. Her encounter has been very meticulously and passionately described by the author in the Prologue, “Then her knees buckled and her body fell to the right, legs doubled up beneath the fur coat. And there she lay, motionless, with her face turned toward the heavens” (7).

Mata Hari is executed in Saint –Lazare prison cell in Paris. Mata Hari is not able to prove her innocence. She stands upright even to the very end. She faces the world which is against an independent woman. Paulo Coelho narrates the scene thus in the novel, “Slowly, she bent down to take a pair of black leather gloves. Then, nonchalantly, she turned to the newcomers and said in a calm voice: “I am ready” ( 5). Mata Hari is a lover of freedom .She wants to be away from her husband Rudolf since he is a hard - drinking man. In her letter to her lawyer Mr. Clunet 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 .I was convicted of espionage even though the only thing concrete I traded was the gossip from high-society salons. Yes, I turned this gossip into “secrets”, because I wanted money and power (13).

“New Historicism” is a term coined by Stephen Greenblatt which designates a body of theoretical and interpretive practices that began mainly with the study of early modern literature in the United States. “New Historicism” in America had been somewhat anticipated by the theorists of “Cultural Materialism” in Britain. Raymond Williams, a leading advocate of New Historicism puts forward the analysis of all forms of signification, including quite centrally writing, within the actual means and conditions of their production. Both “New Historicism” and “Cultural Materialism” seek to understand literary texts historically and reject the formalizing influence of previous literary studies including “New Criticism,” “Structuralism” and “Deconstruction.” This novel has a lot of New Historicist interventions since the main character is executed during the First World War. She is a historical figure whose life is filled with twists and turns. She is arrested in her hotel room and is executed in Saint –Lazare Prison in Paris for having acted as a double agent overhearing and passing the important information between France and Germany. It is a realistic novel which shows how a daring woman is made a victim.

The protagonist grows like a wild tree and she experiences everything that comes in her life. She meets many influential men in different countries and all of them have the desire to get her in their beds. Whose mistake is that? Is it Mata Hari’s desire for freedom that makes her a victim or the men who want to have her make her a victim? Coelho argues that it is the men who are bitten by the charms of her have made her a victim. He pities the condition of women who aspire to lead an independent life are always subjected to victimization in history.

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