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Shazia Qadri

Research Scholar

Department of English

Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University

Rajouri, Jammu and Kashmir,

India

shaziaqadri92@gmail.com

Narcissistic Personality Disorder in Paulo Coelho's *The Spy*

A Character Analysis of Mata Hari

Abstract: Paulo Coelho's 2016 novel *The Spy*, is about Mata Hari who according to *The Washington Post* was "one of the most famous spies of the 20th century" (Siegel 2017) [1]. Mata Hari was an actual living figure during the First World War, she was an exotic, seductive, glamorous dancer who was implicated for espionage. Mata Hari or Margarethe Zella's grandiose style and resplendent life made her a perfect victim for the times she was living in. Though there was a lack of evidence against her yet whatever little the French government could find against her was used to satisfy the bruised consciousness of people

envious of her success. This paper will try to elucidate her character as portrayed by Paulo Coelho as a case of Narcissistic Personality Disorder. American Psychiatric Association defines Narcissistic Personality Disorder as a disorder wherein people "have an inflated sense of their own importance, they expect—and demand—praise and admiration, and they lack empathy" (2000). The character of Mata Hari in *The Spy* qualifies for such disorder because of her wish for excessive admiration and her inflated sense of self-importance which in fact leads her into the trap laid down by the German and French governments. The major focus of the study will be to analyse these symptoms and their consequences on the life of Mata Hari.

Keywords: First World War, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, German, French governments, Spy.

Introduction

There is no single definition which can suffice to define a normal personality. It may be loosely defined in terms of the sociability of a person and how he conforms to the traditions, accepted behavior, forms and functions of a given society. Another quality besides being social is the capability of a person to adapt and be a productive member of a society. An individual with normal personality is ambitious to a certain extent, the success of his efforts makes him enthusiastic and the failure of the same efforts never deters him. Such a person is quiet practical and hopeful. In contrast to this an abnormal person would be one who possesses strange and unusual behavior. The criminals or the juvenile delinquents are also in some measure abnormal. Similarly, people who lack adaptability, empathy, maturity are also unbalanced. Likewise, people who are anti-social or a threat to the safety of other people may also be not categorized among normal people.

Personality disorders are defined by Robin Rosenberg and Stephen Kosslyn in *Abnormal Psychology* as “A category of psychological disorders characterized by a pattern of inflexible and maladaptive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that arise across a range of situations and lead to distress or dysfunction” (567) [2]. Some people incessantly exhibit extreme and inflexible traits that become maladaptive in a variety of situations and often become a cause of personality disorders. Personality disorders reflect persistent thoughts, feelings and behaviors that are essentially different from the norms of the individual culture. The origin of such maladaptive traits is often traced back to early adulthood. In many cases, people with personality disorders are so much used to their own pattern of emotional responses and behavioral tendencies that they may not find this pattern abnormal in any way. Personality disorders are divided into three clusters, Cluster A involves odd or eccentric behaviors, Cluster B involves emotional, dramatic, or erratic behaviors and Cluster C involves anxious and fearful behaviors. Narcissistic Personality Disorder is a part of Cluster B, since it is characterized by an excessive self-importance and difficulty appreciating other people’s perspectives.

Mata Hari’s Case of Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Paulo Coelho in *The Spy* [3] introduces a fictionalized version of Mata Hari's life. Mata Hari was born as Margarethe Geertruide Zella in a prosperous family, her father, Adam Zella owned a hat shop. In 1889 Adam went bankrupt and Antje, Margarethe's mother died two years later. Paulo Coelho describes her as beautiful woman who even as a teenager was quiet aware of her looks, "Early on, as a teenager, I learned that I was beautiful from the way my friends used to imitate me". The genesis of her later self-engrossment can be traced to these early traces of narcissism in her teenage. People suffering from Narcissistic personality disorder often find themselves special, they have an inflated sense of self-importance. The story moves back and forth in time, in the beginning of the novel, Mata Hari writes a letter to Mr. Clunet her lawyer who she thinks will be greatly benefited whether they she gets pardoned or not, she thinks that he will become popular by defending a celebrity war criminal. Without giving a thought to the situation she is in, she is engrossed into thinking that she is famous and that her death would mean a thing to people who witness thousands of such executions in a day.

I can imagine what will happen after. You will be a very busy man, having gained notoriety defending a war criminal. You will have many people knocking at your door, begging for your services, for, even defeated, you attracted huge publicity. You will meet journalists interested to hear your version of events, you will dine in the city's most expensive restaurants, and you will be looked upon with respect and envy by your peers (12).

She believes that she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people, this is one of the characteristics of people with Narcissistic personality disorder, and she is least bothered about the war going on or the soldiers dying. The only thing she can think about moments before her execution is the fame that it will bring to the lawyer handling her case. At eighteen Mata Hari then Margaretha responded to an ad in the newspaper and very soon she got married to Rudolph John Macload, an officer in the East India Army, who was although twice her age yet she imagined that a beautiful woman like her deserves a gentleman as an husband. She thought that her life will be different and she will be on long voyages around the world. The initial nervousness of Rudolph will turn into an admiration for his wife because she was the most beautiful woman according to her classmates. But very soon she came face to face with reality and like a true narcissistic person the shattering of the illusion of an ideal life caused her pain.

My worst nightmare now would be to go through it all again. A distant husband who was surrounded by other women, the impossibility of running away and returning home, the loneliness that came from being forced to spend months indoors because I didn't speak the language, not to mention being consistently kept tabs on by other officers (24).

When her husband came to know of her rape at the age of sixteen by a school principle, he would ask her to narrate the whole story over and over again, while he would masturbate on the thought of his wife getting raped as a young woman, "He called me a whore because I wasn't a virgin when I met him" (25). Later on she bore a son who was eventually poisoned by the nanny. This again came as jolt to her ideal marriage dreams, "Now I had only my daughter, a house that was always empty, a husband who never took me anywhere for fear of being betrayed, and a city so beautiful it felt oppressive; here I was in paradise, living my own personal hell" (28).

Margaretha and her husband eventually returned to Holland and separated. She had left her daughter with her husband and seduced a consul to get a one-way ticket to Paris. That is the point when she acquired the new name Mata Hari and now she was a "classical dancer to oriental music" (43). With no actual training in any form of dance she couldn't survive Paris for long that's when the idea of undressing while dancing worked for her, because as long as men got to see her naked then won't care about the authenticity of the dance she was performing. Psychologist Stephen Johnson in *Character Styles*, writes that the narcissist is someone who has "buried his true self-expression in response to early injuries and replaced it with a highly developed, compensatory false self" [4], that is precisely what Margarethe does, she acquires a new name in response to her early injuries and develops a self that is elevated than her previous identity. And once she became a celebrity she wanted more admiration from people around her, all she couldn't afford was to get off the newspapers. Her entire plan of becoming a spy was the consequence of such wishes, "I am sure that what I am going through now will only add to my reputation; who wouldn't want to be seen as femme fatale, an alleged "spy" full of secrets? Everyone flirts with danger, as long as danger doesn't really exist" (56). She consistently had the wish of being the center of attention, Preston Ni in *8 Common Narcissist Lies: Be on the lookout for these, before you're exploited!* Writes that "Deep down, however, the true self-esteem of the narcissist may be a very different reality. They may feel that they are nothing without the aggrandizement, empty without the attention, and unloved without the adulation," [5] people with narcissistic personality disorder

have a constant desire of being talked about, they want to show how special, beautiful or powerful they are. Mata Hari was further trapped into the trap laid down by nations at war because she won't stop bragging about her contacts in the elite class, she had imagined that just because she had "friends among ministers" (37), she will be pardoned by the president. Normally a person with a stable personality knows that even the least powerful people on the globe won't come to help you out of a situation that is going to harm their own reputation, but Mata Hari's narcissism was responsible for fake optimism that everyone will help her to get away from the prison.

Mayo clinic article *Narcissistic personality disorder* says that "believing that you are superior" and "expecting to be recognized as superior" [6] as two important characteristics of narcissistic personality disorder. Individuals with this condition are never disgusted by talking about their achievements and greatness. They won't leave an opportunity to tell people how great they are, Mata Hari never received any formal training in dance yet as soon as she gets on the headline of a newspaper she begins to see herself as "the woman who has been and always will be the fascination of men and the envy of women"(57). She doesn't face the truth that all her admirers really admire is her body and not her art or craft.

The self-image as created by a narcissist is nothing but just a disguise concocted to protect the inner fragile self which can barely tolerate any sort of criticism, Mata Hari herself wanted to create a story about a herself in which she played a femme fatale, a heroine and a spy. In fact she herself encouraged the suspicions of the government against her because she felt no matter what happens her connections in the elite class will not let her die in prison. At one point she says "There is zero concrete evidence against me, beyond what I myself encouraged in order to boost my own importance after I decided to stop dancing (despite being an excellent dancer)" (74), this clearly shows that the earlier claims of being "born at a wrong time" (15) are false, Preston argues in his article *8 Common Narcissist Lies Be on the lookout for these, before you're exploited!* That "one of the most common responses of the narcissist is to point fingers, and shift responsibility to others". She herself led the government agencies to suspect her, as soon as the Germans recruited her as a spy she called the French office to inform them that she has been hired by the German Intelligence but her loyalty is with the French Government. "Life had become interesting again" (131) for her but this thrill for gaining notoriety turned her into Saint-Lazare prison, a former leper colony and hospice.

Conclusion

Although on outside narcissistic personality disorder makes people appear strong and bold but inside they are weaker than one can imagine. Margarethe adopted the name of Mata Hari to hide the inner woman seeking love and freedom but her new name gave her new troubles and made her do things she shouldn't have done. On the outside she was Mata Hari a bold seductive woman but on the inside she continued to be the same girl who was raped by the Pedophilic principle and then harassed by a much elder husband. She sought admiration from people but unfortunately she failed to understand her own psychic condition and the real world of male chauvinism which doesn't value a woman beyond her body.

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