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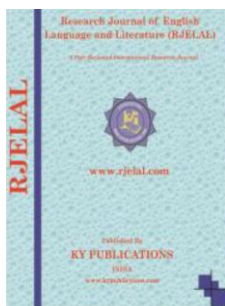
## THE BODY SPACE OF RESISTANCE AS PERFORMANCE IN PAULO COELHO'S *THE SPY*

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### ABSTRACT

The regulation of woman by patriarchy and her resistance to the same are poignantly written by authors and popularly studied by critics alike. Hegemonic power structures of religion, law and state sponsored by patriarchy have globally dictated several norms regarding her mobility and containment. When a woman uses her body as a potential site of transgression, its textuality crosses the borders of norms and discourses. The best-selling Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho explores the life of an emancipated woman named Mata Hari, a historical figure from the decades of the First World War in his novel *The Spy* (2016). Coelho draws his women as liberated, even in instances of their succumbing in struggles of resistance, and can rightly be called a post-feminist male author. The paper aims to read the power of woman's body as a space of resistance to patriarchal spatial asymmetries as represented in the novel.

**Key words:** body, patriarchal hegemony, Paulo Coelho, post feminism, private space, public space, resistance

### INTRODUCTION

The most popular notion of space as inert and neutral is questioned and replaced by Marxist geographers in their spatial theories that it is socially produced, as Henri Lefebvre argues in *The Production of Space* (1974/1991). Space, time and society form the triad of human experience and thus space is both constitutive of and produced by social relations. The production of space also means production or construction of meanings and discourses. Lefebvre explains the self concealing trait of the social production of space. Production of space is suggested as a complex symbolism with "frontal expressions" as well as "clandestine or underground aspects". It follows that representation of this hidden process of production of space in narrative would resort to metaphorical depiction

and thus open to be deconstructed. Lefebvre's three-sided spatial model is widely discussed in domains of social analysis: spatial practices, representations of space and spaces of representation. Spatial practices are physical spaces of social actions which are instrumental in production and reproduction of space. Representations of space are linked with relations of production and to the order which they construct and enforce through the media of knowledge, truth etc over the mental spaces. Spaces of representation are complex symbolisms inclusive of the above two forms of space, that break the logic of binaries, and are characterised as alive, fluid and dynamic.

Edward Soja uses his notion of the Third space as a possibility of the margin, to think of it as a

potential space of domination, violation and liberation, a space to think from the perspective of the peripheralised. It is an alternative space, simultaneously conceived and lived, as opposed to the objectively experienced First space and the subjectively imagined Second space because it posits itself in 'the other'. Third space is the space of the margin, between the self and the other, the centre and periphery. It sheds light on the various discourses of gender, ethnicity, race, religion etc as it does with that of territory.

Bhabha's postcolonial theorisation of the 'third space' reminds one of Soja's Third space, conceptualized as both enabling to view one's own identity from other positions emerging from the periphery as well as displacing existing discourses and restructuring spatial imaginaries of authority. However, Soja's choice of disagreement in this respect is beached on the following lines: "Third space of Homi Bhabha is occasionally teasingly on the edge of being a spatially ungrounded literary trope, a floating metaphor for a critical historical consciousness that inadvertently masks a continued privilege of temporality over spatiality" (141-2). However, Bhabha's concept of in-between spaces in *The Location of Culture* that they provide "the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (1-2) is pertinent to the present study.

The sheer invisibility of space in anthropology and other human sciences in the decades prior to the spatial turn is denotative of the pre-given conditions of the discursive nature of power, denigrating space beneath temporality and epistemology. To Doreen Massey, though space which is material than abstract and feminine than masculine is a denigrated category in comparison with time, it conquers time through dislocation and repetition thus surmounting reality through representation. While she maintains that this victory reinforces the enmity between the two entities, it is crucial and epoch-making in fixing time in spatial categories. Extending it to anthropological studies, this victory is again instrumental in recognising that

evolutionism and history are not only naturalised but spatialised.

There is a subtle mutuality between the exterior and interior space in problematising common man's network of relations. One way in which patriarchy establishes the binary of good/bad in women is by systematizing that good women are confined and restricted to their homes, while the wandering woman who travels and undergoes dislocation is indecent. The private realm was the fortress for the woman and the public sphere meant losing her virtue, risking her name and falling prey to the claws of immorality. The public/private dichotomy entrenched in this patriarchal ideology of the domestic space intensified the hegemony of the masculine over the feminine with the former deciding the norms for behaviour for the latter. The binary is problematic regarding the woman's positioning and movement based on her entry into the public sphere, even if it is for the sake of her job. The territories of the city, in the words of Pollock, become "the sites for negotiation of gendered class identities and class gender positions" (70).

Most of Paulo Coelho's fictional narratives are spatialised in the sense that the protagonists are constantly on the move, and the displacement accentuates the importance of space in their lives. This paper intends to explore the public/private dichotomy, how it engenders certain spaces as totems and taboos and how women, in transcending the barrier establishing themselves a 'gynic space', offer resistance to the check imposed on their mobility, in the context of his novel *The Spy* (2016). One can say that most of his novels dovetail post feminism, and provide ample space for the woman protagonists to cross domestic barriers and travel worldwide, contrary to the patriarchal notions that formulate the image of the good woman as a tame and docile home maker, and *The Spy* is no exception to this.

#### **BODY AS A SPACE OF RESISTANCE**

Margaretha Zelle, the protagonist who detested her maiden name and self-christened as Mata Hari in *The Spy*, travels across countries at a time, the end of nineteenth century, when travel for a woman was restricted by patriarchal ideology. It

must be coincidental that the conceptual New Woman emerged in the 1890s, precisely the same time she decided to pursue her desires. The gender history of the times still gave privilege to the patriarchal misogyny over the firmness of the emancipated Zelle: "I was the one manipulated. The crimes I did commit, I escaped, the greatest of which was being an emancipated and independent woman in a world ruled by men" (Coelho 12). She continues, asserting her selfhood and identity:

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 moved forward with courage, fearlessly paying the price she had to pay. (Coelho 15)

The range of productive and discursive power, that enslaves, represses and is essentially negative in nature, is not limited to law, prison or the tribunal. It is found on every walk of ordinary social life, including the structures or establishments like religion that man is part of, the institutions that man run like schools or hospitals, and even in the family. In the case of a raped female body, remarked as qualified with inevitable vulnerability, opens possibilities for the male ideology to practise dominance on the woman incapable of retaliating, thus proclaiming that she is "rapable" (Henderson 241). The molestation of Zelle by her school principal falls on the above lines. After the violent experience, the teenage girl is left "confused and frightened, determined not to tell anyone what had happened" until she heard of the same experience from another girl of her group and shared the same fear: "We risked being expelled from school and sent back home, unable to explain the reason. So we were forced to keep quiet" (Coelho 21). A woman is raped not because she is a physiological body of genitalia but because it is possible for the man to encroach to her physical territory using violence and coercion.

Exasperated with the sexual harassments as a teenager from her school principal and the lashes of misfortune in the family, Zelle chooses to get married to Rudolf MacLeod, an officer in the Dutch

army, stationed in Indonesia. The zeal to cross the geographical and situational barriers coupled with a repugnance to the conservatism and gender prejudices is visible in her thoughts: "There was my salvation! Officer. Indonesia. Strange seas and exotic worlds. Enough of conservative, Calvinist Holland, full of prejudice and boredom" (Coelho 22). Her sole motive to travel to distant lands and not to establish an intimacy with the man twenty-one years elder to her is evident in her afterthoughts deciding to marry him on her third and final meeting with him: "Indonesia. Army captain. Voyages to faraway places. What more could a young woman want from life?" (Coelho 23).

A distant husband surrounded by local women, the "loneliness that came from being forced to spend months indoors" (Coelho 24) and domestic marital violence inflicted severe scars on the woman's mind heaving a silent sigh: "Gradually I lost sight of who I was" (Coelho 26). She articulates the brutality of marital rape she had to undergo within no time. She writes how she was forced by her husband to wear the school uniform and had to undergo re-enactments of the rape scene violently. Though she "concealed the scratches and bruises under extra makeup", she could not still hide the story of the domestic flogs and lashes (Coelho 26). The murder of her second child by one of the servants adds to her agony, but it is revealed painfully that "it was deserved retaliation, as the nanny had been constantly beaten, raped and burdened by endless working hours" (Coelho 27). A woman who once dreamt of travelling, Zelle now condemns that "the city so beautiful it felt oppressive; here I was in paradise, living my own personal hell" (Coelho 28). A gynec space assuring freedom of mobility and fearless work for women in the private or public sphere becomes an apparent, imaginary space. Her decision to leave the place marks the beginning of her dislocating transformation into the 'femme fatale', Mata Hari.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler observes the body in performance as a discursive practice. This does not mean that performing bodies autonomously produce discourse. In actuality they do so because bodies are effects of discourse as the latter situates the framework for the body to move

and act. Power operates in regulating the placement and movement of people, imposing on them practices and norms by constructing spatial boundaries and ordering bodies in space which explains why women and men are located differently within the public and the private sphere. The construction of a feminine space for the 'public woman' – woman in the masculine, public sphere – is viewed with suspicion as it warrants the presence of woman of 'questionable moral values' in a patriarchal society. Zelle uses her once violated body to interrogate the power of discourse that tends to regulate raped or rapable bodies and transforms into the femme fatale of the First World War decade, Mata Hari. Theatre as a space for bourgeois recreation, a 'professional' public sphere is utilized by Mata Hari to not merely cross the boundary between the public and the private but that of gender inequality and ethical asymmetries too.

Coelho's femme fatale Mata Hari utilizes the same violated, persecuted, vulnerable body to pursue the career of a performing artist and courtesan. Not only does she dislocate herself from an abominable place through travels but she dislocates her body also, challengingly transforming into an erotic icon to make the front pages of newspapers within no time:

Slender and tall, with the lithe grace of a wild animal, Mata Hari has black hair that undulates strangely and transports us to a magical place. The most feminine of all women, writing an unfamiliar tragedy with her body. A thousand curves and movements combine perfectly with a thousand different rhythms (Coelho 55).

Performance draws a thin line between fact and fantasy, particularly when it comes to art based on the corporeal. Claiming to be a classical dancer to exotic Oriental music, she manages to win applauses from respectable audiences because unlike striptease which was banned considering it to be a mere display of flesh, her performances still conformed to the legal norms. In her letter, Mata Hari is proud to have transformed that "grotesque spectacle into art" by choreographed simulations and suggestions (Coelho 74). Weaving a complex

web of seduction, deception, romance and attitude, she is, day by day, able to draw suitors to her enticing persona.

Spaces and places are central in contextualizing prostitution, marking the hierarchies and stratifications in the discipline. A hierarchical privilege is conferred on the private space over public space, by those 'elite prostitutes' practicing indoor prostitution like escorts and courtesans in hotels, brothels and parlors over those who work outdoor like streets, alleys and markets. Geographer Philip Hubbard views that very limited studies have been conducted as to how "the imaging (and imagining)" of spaces produce a prostitute as the 'other' (Hulusjö 206). Mata Hari interrogates the ethical concerns posed by her profession as a performing artist in the era of Victorian morality. The interesting paradox that emerges here is of the bad woman stereotype for a striptease artist or a prostitute juxtaposed with the 'respectable man/woman' tag attributed to her spectators. She discloses in her letter to Clunet that she danced before "an audience of three hundred people, including journalists, celebrities, and at least two ambassadors- one from Japan and one from Germany" (Coelho 58).

The hypocrisy of social elitism is evident as she writes: "I was in a respectable place, with an audience who was eager for new things but lacked the courage to visit the certain kinds of places where they might be seen" (Coelho 58-59). Monsieur Guimet's private museum stage where she danced becomes this above mentioned imagined space which powerfully produces an 'other' in prostitutes and courtesans of her sort. The sexual autonomy she exercises over her body versus the devouring fe/male gaze that falls upon her is captured in the reaction of the so called elite, bourgeois women watching her performance: "Even the women, whose eyes I met now and then between movements, did not seem shocked or angry; it must have excited them as it did the men" (Coelho 59). The invitations that followed her debut performance were also intended for an elite, respectable audience, one "at a charity ball to raise funds for wounded Russian soldiers" and one for Madame Guimet herself (Coelho 61).

The perverseness of male ideology and the patriarchal authority is the driving force of the erasure of a woman who if survived, would have become the “all-powerful political seductress” of all times. The whole episode of her execution would make one wonder the logic behind the two armies deciding to convict a woman who posed little threat to either nation. The larger scenario of gender politics is revealed as Nora Gilbert quotes biographer Rosie White: “As a woman and as a public figure, Mata Hari represented a disturbingly mobile femininity. Her trial was an attempt to fix that mobility within the regime of sexual and imperial relations” (7). The misogyny of the prosecutor Dr. Mornet is arched with hatred:

Zelle is the kind of dangerous woman we see nowadays. The ease with which she expresses herself in several languages – especially French – her numerous relations in all areas, her subtle way of worming into social circles, her elegance, her remarkable intelligence, her immorality, all this contributes to her being seen as a potential suspect (Coelho 167).

#### CONCLUSION

Male authored novels tend to embody the female protagonists with male voyeuristic fantasies of female sexuality, from the holds of which Coelho’s women escape to a considerable extent. In *The Spy*, Coelho cautiously keeps a safe distance from patriarchal supremacy over female autonomy and approaches Mata Hari on a feminine space. He renders this post feminist novel by writing the female body’s resistance to molestation, thereby immortalizing the counter-discursive performance by Mata Hari. The historic objectification of Mata Hari as a mere erotic icon is slashed and a closer-to-real picture of a woman manipulating men in a necessarily pre- and anti-feminist era is drawn in a gentle manner. *The Spy*, bereft of the general tendency to viewing the female body as a mere object of male desire but rather as sites of struggle and emancipation of the self, turns to be subversive as the woman transgresses the margin to go beyond the gendered borders, her performance resisting the shackles of social, ethical, hermeneutic and

patriarchal ideologies. Thus, as Mata Hari in *The Spy* wished, she will certainly be remembered not “as a victim, but as someone who moved forward with courage, fearlessly paying the price she had to pay” (Coelho 15).

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