

ONE LITTLE ORCHID  
MATA HARI: A MARGINAL VOICE



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A MARGINAL  
VOICE



SANUSRI  
BHATTACHARYA



Westphalia Press  
An Imprint of the Policy Studies Organization  
Washington, DC  
2016

ONE LITTLE ORCHID | MATA HARI: A MARGINAL VOICE  
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Westphalia Press  
An imprint of Policy Studies Organization  
1527 New Hampshire Ave., NW  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
info@ipsonet.org

ISBN-10: 1-63391-413-5  
ISBN-13: 978-1-63391-413-1

Cover and interior design by Jeffrey Barnes  
jbarnesbook.design

Daniel Gutierrez-Sandoval, Executive Director  
PSO and Westphalia Press

Updated material and comments on this edition  
can be found at the Westphalia Press website:  
[www.westphaliapress.org](http://www.westphaliapress.org)

*To my mother who endured in silence*





It is apparently quite strange for someone having studied Philosophy for so long to take up a subject of historical importance; but being an amateur historian I have dared to venture into the realm primarily due to two reasons—my interest in spy stories and Mata Hari’s claim to be an Indian. Therefore, this book should not be taken as a historical documentation. However, the most important reason probably lies in an incident of my adolescent days, which I would love to share with my readers. I remember one night in the early 1970s, when I had gone to see a local tent theater called *Vietnam* with my mother. The play had pertinently depicted the role of spies in the Vietnam War. While walking back home on that moonlit night with her, she told me about Mata Hari. I have lost my mother nearly 30 years back, and Mata Hari had somehow slipped out of my mind. In 2010 I had an opportunity to visit Holland. While searching the internet for some details about the country before my visit I stumbled on her name, and thus Mata Hari resurfaced in my life.

When I started reading her biography I curiously came across not only the story of an ambitious courtesan and a famous demimondaine of the early previous century, but the era that had actually been very important to the narrative. Colonialism had been playing a significant role in cultural exchange worldwide. European industrialization, the new feminist waves, misogyny, and the bourgeois beliefs of the day—all had played respective roles in her life story. I was amazed to notice many similarities between the European and Indian societies of that time, similarities in the social values, in the way women were treated by men, and also how religious racism engulfed human mind. For me Mata Hari’s life is primarily a story of male domination, of women’s oppression under the then patriarchal culture and in a thoroughly hypocrite bourgeois society, and her struggle to get freedom from enchainment. Her dancing had only been an expression of her emancipation. There is no dearth of Indian women of that time who had experienced similar plights. I have found some verses in the more than two millennia old *Manusmriti* or the

Code of Manu having striking parity with the Code of Napoleon, especially those in relation to women's social conduct, which had influenced the whole of European society during the nineteenth century and after years. For example, *Manusmriti* (9.3) says—"Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, and her sons protect her in old age; woman is never fit for independence." Napoleon believed that disorder would reign entirely in society if women came out of the state of dependency where they ought to remain. He also strongly believed that women are nothing but machines for producing children and that women's proper role in the society was being a wife. Similarly, *Manusmriti* (9.96) says that women are created to become mothers.

Victorian morality, that had its base in the Napoleonic Code, had equally affected the colonized Indian society. Like Napoleon most Indian men prefer to be acquainted with womanly woman and not with a sort of owl who would sit and talk serious matters with them. The social prejudice against Mata Hari is identical to that of any bold, assertive, and independent woman of that time in India. And strangely even today, mostly in suburban and rural India, women's ideal place in the society is still considered to be inside the house, ideal behavior unquestionable obedience to the social patriarchal norms, their ideal destiny marriage and child bearing. Women have perpetually been expected to be feeble, dependent, and to lack grey matter. The "two-sphere" social model is equally dominant in the Indian society as it had been in Europe. So, while reading about Mata Hari I could very well understand the ordeal that she had to go through and also her struggle to get out of it. She had been convicted as an enemy spy and was killed as a measure to purge the society of evil. It was due to the war situation in France that she had been thus eliminated. If there happened to be no war, even then she would have been the target of the French society that had taken much interest in her at her prime time. She had been a perfect example of "give the dog a bad name and hang him." France had deliberately done that to her. But why? I have tried to look for a reasonable answer to this question in the following chapters.

Mata Hari's life has intrigued many through the past century, and there is no dearth of her biographies to research from; but my chief constraint has been my lack of knowledge of French, German, and other European languages apart from English. Therefore, I had to base my study only on the English biographies. I would like to take this opportunity to thank

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all the authors who have toiled diligently to put together all the nuances of her life, especially Sam Waagenaar and Pat Shipman, through the eyes of whom I have first seen the “little orchid” Mata Hari. I have tried to travel through that epoch in order to collect every possible bit related to her story, and have enjoyed the journey immensely. I thank the UK government for declassifying important documents (1999) related to her case. I have benefited significantly from the uploaded information in the website during this work. I thank The Mata Hari Foundation of the Fries Museum (Leeuwarden), Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris), Getty Images Media India Private Limited, and Alamy Images India for giving me the printing right of some of their copyright images for this book. Images have carefully been chosen that would enable the readers to have a clear idea about Mata Hari and her time. I thank my teacher Dr. Shefali Moitra from the core of my heart for her invaluable advices and her patience with me. I also mention my friend Dr. Ratna Munshi with gratitude for all her support.

It is however not the least easy to pick up the pen and assemble word after word in an effort to look for a long lost episode in history. Moreover, since anti-propaganda has built a wall of perception which is hard to demolish. But still I have tried to rebuild the story bit by bit, which mirrors the then society that had long been buried in our memory. I accept responsibility of all inaccuracies in this work.

West Bengal (India), 2016

Sanusri Bhattacharya



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## INTRODUCTION

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### A SKETCH OF LIFE

In the summer of 1914, everything had suddenly started changing in Europe. On June 28, Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand was killed in Sarajevo along with his wife. Gavrilo Princip, an 18-year-old student member of the Serbian Black Hand group, had shot them from close range. The fatal attack killed both in full view of a cheering and triumphal crowd. The horrible assassination had led to the July Crisis, eventually inflicting bitter battles involving almost all the countries of the world—either for the Triple Entente and against the Central powers or *vice versa*. Austria–Hungary’s invasion of Serbia had been well planned, and the First World War had begun. As in any other war, common citizens of the combatant countries became the worst sufferers. The landscape in Europe had started changing rapidly due to the offenses in the following years from both sides. The Great War had started casting its impact on the world—nature, environment, people, economy, and culture—nothing had been spared. Fritz Stern wrote about the war: “The first calamity of the twentieth century, the Great War, from which all other calamities sprang.” Regarding the impact of the war Christopher Clark wrote that the war had unleashed the demons of political disorder, extremism, and cruelty that disfigured the twentieth century. He added: “The conflict ... mobilized 65 million troops, claimed three empires, 20 million military and civilian deaths, and 21 million wounded.”<sup>1</sup> Comparing with the war of 1870 John H. Cox wrote in the *New York Tribune* (August 23, 1914): “The war of forty-four years ago was child’s play compared with the war at the present time.”<sup>2</sup> Magnitude of devastation of the First World War has clearly been reflected through these comments, and the common people’s plight therefore is not difficult to imagine.

The only person who could continue unperturbed by all of that was Mata

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1 Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, 1.

2 John H. Cox, “Alsace Blighted by War Horrors,” *New York Tribune*; August 23, 1914, 2.

Hari, the famous dancer and infamous woman of that era—infamous because in spite of being a woman she loved freedom, had challenged the male world by denying to adhere to the rules that had been set forth by the privileged sex, and because she had been arrested and executed by the French for being a notorious enemy spy during the First World War. There is no doubt about her being famous as a dancer, whether trained or not, but as regards to her being an infamous spy there is ample scope for re-evaluation. Pretty much has been written about whether she had actually been a spy or not, some concluding that she was indeed an enemy spy working for Germany having instrumented much harm to France and the people in wartime, including collective assassination (Thomas Coulson, Edouard Massard, George Ladoux, and others) in the Battle of Somme in 1916, and some of her biographers have defended her even with documentary proof claiming that she had never been a spy (Sam Waagenaar, Pat Shipman, Bernard Newman, Julia Wheelwright, and others). I personally prefer to side with the latter group, as I certainly find the former's allegations unfounded by reason and guided almost entirely by hearsay and prejudice. Even the juries and the judge of the military court, who had virtually been blind against her, had preferred to rely on unfounded sources while passing the judgment of her guilt, and of awarding death penalty to Mata Hari. The prosecution did not care to support her execution by conclusive evidence, which had been a glaring injustice as justice can never be delivered on the basis of insufficient evidence.

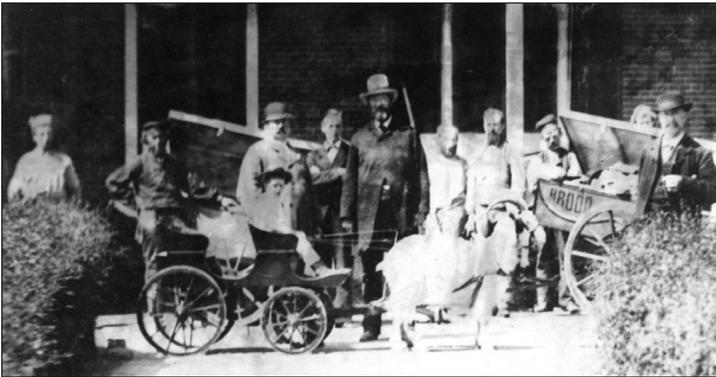
I wonder why—why did the French do injustice to her? It cannot arguably be true that they had been inexperienced or incompetent in their job. It becomes all the more hard even to imagine that all of them had lost their heads while dealing with the case of a once famous demimondaine. Therefore, for me the biggest question happens to be—why did the situation move to that extreme for her? It could undoubtedly be asserted that Mata Hari's court-martial and the subsequent death sentence was a grave miscarriage of justice on the part of France. But one becomes compelled to wonder what did go wrong for her? Alfred Dreyfus, arrested for treason and espionage in 1894 by the French army, had been lucky to have had stalwarts like Bernard Lazare, Émile Zola, and all the eminent republicans by his side to defend and eventually to save him from the firing squad by all means; but despite having enumerable lovers and acquaintances at the highest ranks of the society, Mata Hari had found no one to stand by her at the time of her deepest distress. Feminist movements

had already been in the wake in France from the previous century, and eminent personalities like Dr. Madeleine Pelletier, Marguerite Durand, Natalie Clifford Barney, Nelly Roussel, and a few others had been working in the field to make the private as well as the public space more suited for women by defending equal rights for them in all the aspects of social life. Why did they not try to motivate the press in order to generate a public debate regarding her case? Was it only because she was being tried in a military court? Alfred Dreyfus, for that matter, had also been tried in a similar way, but that did not prevent the French media and the people in general to take sides firmly. France, and particularly Paris, had been the center stage for remarkable feminist movements of the Marquis de Condorcet, Etta Palm d'Aelders, Olympe de Gouges, and others since the eighteenth century, who had professed equal rights for women. Published in 1791 there had already been *The Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen* in France, which gave equal rights to all the citizens—men and women alike. Moreover, Mata Hari was not even a French citizen since she had hailed from The Netherlands. Did she not have the right to fair trial?

Hence, the “why” question really haunts. Was it so that Mata Hari had been the only so-called spy apparently working for Germany? Certainly not. Did the French identify, capture, and punish those for whom she was accused of spying? Definitely not. During wartime it had been absolutely proper for the French to have suspected her as an enemy spy and even to have prosecuted her, but could the death sentence be justified by any means? Was there enough evidence to prove her guilty of enemy espionage beyond any doubt? Many of her biographers have detailed on the issue, and even after a century one is prompted to believe that virtually no justice, rather some kind of injustice had been delivered to her in the form of capital punishment, which took her life in the cold and foggy morning of October 15, 1917.

Search for the truth claims for looking back into her life from the early days—the backdrop of the colorful and sparkling existence that had been her own creation, which she enjoyed to the hilt, is primarily important, because that could help one to determine the persona of Mata Hari, which is especially significant to analyze her fate. She was born on August 7, 1876, as Margarethe Geertruida Zelle, the eldest child of a successful hatter, Adam Zelle, of the small town of Leeuwarden in northern

Holland. Her mother Antje Johannes van der Meulen was as usual a very gentle lady from an unprivileged and humble background, who loved to remain busy with her household chores perfectly suited to the traditional model of femininity in a bourgeois family of that era. Not much is known about her, only that she was born in Friesland at a place named Franeker in 1842 to Johannes Henderikus van der Meulen and Sjoukje Ymes Faber, and had married Adam Zelle in 1873. She had a choice for cultivated qualities, and Margarethe must have thus had it in her blood. Antje's diary of poetries<sup>3</sup> had remained with Margarethe for much long, even after her marriage with Rudolf MacLeod. However, besides owning a considerably big and fashionable hat shop Adam had also made successful investments in the oil industry, which gave him enough affluence to develop a great ego—he preferred to be called a “Baron,” which shows his feudal mindset as well. His family had increased with the increase of his wealth—Antje gave birth to three boys (some of Margarethe's biographers wrote four)—Johannes Hendriks was born on November 26, 1878—2 years and a few months younger to Margarethe, (though unconfirmed, some said Antje gave birth to another boy called Jacob, who was born in 1880 and lived unto his mature age, had been married to Antje Brouwer, his son became a pastor in Leeuwarden), and the twins Arie Anne and Cornelis Coenraad, born on September 9, 1881—5 years younger to her.



Margarethe on the *bokkenwaagen* presented to her by Adam on August 7, 1882.  
(The Mata Hari Foundation, Fries Museum, Leeuwarden)

3 Russell Warren Howe wrote that it contained love poems written to her husband (Adam); *Mata Hari, The True Story*, 18; though according to Sam Waagenaar, Antje copied mostly religious poems in her diary, with the exception of one love poem; *The Murder of Mata Hari*, 1964, 21. I presume Waagenaar had been right.

Adam Zelle had a good physique—he was tall and handsome. When King William III of The Netherlands had visited Leeuwarden in 1873 Adam was selected for the Mounted Guard of Honor as he had been a good rider, and in one of his rare paintings he was seen on a horse back in full uniform—Adam had got it painted by A. Martin,<sup>4</sup> the famous Dutch painter of his time, which had obviously decorated the Zelle's interior for quite some time. He was so conceited that later he had handed over the painting to the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, because he must have thought that it had been a piece of artwork worth for preservation. From the very beginning that painting had hung in front of little Margarethe's eyes, and she had always admired the smart and handsome man (her father) in uniform. The love for uniform all through her life might have had the root in that painting of Adam. He had enough money to keep his family well and to afford good upbringing for his children. Especially for his gorgeously charming darling Margarethe who was sent to Miss Buys' school nearby on the Hofplein, where she had learnt impeccable manner, classic music, beautiful and elegant handwriting, along with French and other subjects. Due to such an exquisite upbringing she might have developed a liking for music and dance.

As the first child Margarethe had been pampered to all extremes by her father, who had presented her a goat-driven carriage on her sixth birthday. Goat carriages had been a common sight in many European homes—lower and upper classes alike—which were mainly used to carry children, but also to carry various household goods like milk, water, vegetables, etc. Those lightweight carriages had been a favorite with the European children in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. When chubby-cheeked and gorgeously-dressed cute little Margarethe drove in that splendid carriage everyone in her town stared at the spectacular sight with awe. She was fondly called “an orchid among buttercups” by Adam, who often gifted her with expensive colorful dresses. Even at a much later date her friends from the school she went to recalled her charming looks and her wonderful fashionable dresses she had always been seen in. Margarethe was admired for all that and she enjoyed the attention very much. She was proud to be a daddy's girl and must have been thankful to her father for all that he had provided her. In January 1883, as Adam was earning well from his oil shares, and to satisfy his inflated ego, he had decided to take a beautiful bigger house at 28 Groote Kerkstraat

4 Waagenaar, *op. cit.*, 1964, 17.

in Leeuwarden. He was quite extravagant in his lifestyle and had been drawn to the “paraphernalia of gentility.”<sup>5</sup> He loved to show off his wealth and status to the aristocrat community of the small town of Leeuwarden. The treatment Margarethe had received from Adam might have developed her passion for opulence, which she had pursued all through her life. Never did she tire from seeking luxury, not even in difficult times.

The Freudian theory of femininity seems to be pertinent to explore her psyche. Johannes had been born when Margarethe was just a 2 year plus toddler. According to psychoanalytical theories it is the defining stage in the development of gender and sexual identity for a woman. Seeing her brother with a penis, which she did not have and hence felt castrated, she might have developed a kind of penis envy, which had persisted into her adult life in the form of an unfettered attraction for men. I would like to link this to her “father fixation” as well, derived from a sort of Electra-complex,<sup>6</sup> due to which she had developed a nostalgic longing for man’s love from a very young age. Little Margarethe had certainly developed this kind of attachment toward Adam as he was very good looking and used to pamper his daughter completely to her delight. With her father she felt like a princess, and it is quite normal that she would like to feel the same always. She had learnt from her father to think of herself as someone very special, and all through her life she wanted to “live like a butterfly under the sun”—free from all duties and responsibilities, free from all bondage and servitude.



Margarethe as a teenager  
(The Mata Hari Foundation, Fries Museum, Leeuwarden)

5 Patricia Branca, *Silent Sisterhood*, 6.

6 Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality*, 108; Jill Scott, *Electra after Freud: Myth and Culture*, 8; Sharon Heller, *Freud A to Z*, 94.

However, the contentment in Adam's life had not been long lasting. His failure of right speculations in the share market had resulted in his bankruptcy on February 18, 1889, and he had to declare his inability to pay off his loans. Due to his financial conditions he had to give up the big house, and leaving behind his poverty stricken family in Leeuwarden he had to go to The Hague in search of a better living. Margarethe was an adolescent teenager at that time, who had been forced into severe financial hardship as no longer did her father bring expensive gifts for her, no beautiful new dresses anymore, and a cheaper house to live in near the railway station and the cattle market on the Willemskade with her mother and three brothers. The children had been admitted to the Cammingha State School there, which matched in no way with Miss Buys' aristocratic school. Like Adam, Margarethe too loved to show off, but the newly developed untoward circumstances had prevented her from doing so. She was a pampered teenager with an extravagant taste, and therefore had genuinely been unhappy with the consequences, for which she had only blamed her father. After more than a year later, Adam had returned to Leeuwarden, but could not reconcile with Antje. By the end of that summer they had opted for a legal separation, which was granted in September 1890. Freed by law Adam had moved on to Amsterdam, and had started living with another woman immediately. Antje could not bear the shame and poverty, which took its toll upon her health, and on May 10, 1891, she had died (presumably of tuberculosis) leaving the four children to their own destiny. Adam was still not in a position to take care of them together, and hence Margarethe was sent to Sneek (a small town 17 miles south of Leeuwarden) to live with her uncle Vissers' family, Johannes was sent to Antje's paternal family in Franeker, (since Antje's father Johannes Hendrikus van der Meulen had died in 1881, young Johannes must have been taken to the care of her brother Yme van der Meulen) and the twins, who were not even 10 years old at that time, had been taken to live with Adam in Amsterdam. Margarethe was literally outraged with the arrangement. She had desperately wanted to live with her father, and the Royal City of Amsterdam was far more attractive to her than Sneek. A strong sense of disgust had seized her. The thought of avenging her betrayal must have occurred in her subconscious mind at that young age.

In Sneek at the Vissers', Margarethe did not find any reason to behave like an angel, which had infuriated the hosts for obvious reasons. Leiden

had been a place of many educational experiments from the middle of the nineteenth century and was known as the “City of Books.” In 1892, she was sent to a boarding school at Leiden for Kindergarten training, so that she could become a teacher in future. By that time Margarethe was 15 and knew pretty well that her character traits did not match to those of a dedicated motherly teacher, and she might also have detested the idea that other people would be controlling her destiny. She was seen getting involved in a scandalous encounter with the Director of Kindergarten Training and headmaster of the school Herr Wybrandus Haanstra, an accomplished teacher and reformist in the field of girl’s education (inspired by Friedrich Fröebel he had developed a special learning method—the Leyden method—for the pre-primary children) who had been a respectable elderly man of 51, and Margarethe only 16 then. Varied versions of the incident are available—Margarethe herself had initiated the shameful sexual encounter with the headmaster, who had blamed and disgraced her for the mishap, and then had rusticated her from the school (1893) fearing more scandals.<sup>7</sup> Another version has speculated that the headmaster had actually fallen in love with the extremely attractive teenager and had exploited her sexually.<sup>8</sup> She was then shamed for having loose morale and had been expelled from the school.

The second version is hard to be believed, because such attitude could rarely be expected from an accomplished elderly man, especially when he had been respected for his work as a headmaster for quite long (he was appointed as the Director in 1882) of the Kindergarten Training School for girls. So, if the former version had been true, then it might be logically presumed that Margarethe had staged the scandalous drama not out of lust, but actually to get rid of the meaningless exercise of getting trained as a teacher, and also to get relieved from the Visser’s household where she did not want to return. Whatever the fact might have been, as it appears that, by that time she had already learnt to use her feminine charm to get things done in her favor. As a naïve teenager she might have thought that out of sheer shame the Vissers would send her back to her father in Amsterdam, but things did not turn out to be the way she wanted to. She was instead sent to live with Pieter W. Taconis, husband of Geetruida Zelle, who was the younger sister of Adam,<sup>9</sup> in The Hague.

7 Pat Shipman, *Femme Fatale*, 11.

8 Waagenaar, *op. cit.*, 1964, 22; Julie Wheelwright, *The Fatal Lover*, 10.

9 *Netherlands Patriciaat*; (from the official website of Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie).

This had been the actual turning point in Margarethe's life. By then she was almost 17 years of age, and had ultimately realized that Adam would not take her along to stay with him ever again. So she would need to do something on her own to fulfill her dreams of opulence and comfort, which she had been deprived of by her father. From the core of her heart she had believed that she was indeed a princess and it was her right to be so. Therefore, if her father refused to provide her that status, she could look for a husband who would. Margarethe had failed to realize the actuality of life or she might have never wanted to. She had developed wrong self-esteem, for which she was not to be blamed though; but it had reflected her immature and impulsive nature, due to which she even had to suffer wrongful death. Margarethe had actually lived four lives—Greeta, the "little orchid;" Griet, Rudolf MacLeod's wife; Mata Hari, the larger than life identity designed by her; and Marina, Vadime de Massloff's beloved sweetheart—and as we would see that all were linked together in an invisible intimate bond—the former life always became the foundation of the latter, and at the end Marina came heavy on all the rest.

Mata Hari's personality might be regarded as narcissistic in nature. Significantly, narcissism is usually considered as a disorder, although many psychologists have pointed it out to be a significant stage in the development of human mind. Havelock Ellis, who had coined the term "narcissism" in 1898, used it to refer to some kind of sexual perversion that he thought was characterized by considering the self as a sexual object. In 1899, Paul Nacke, in the same vein, wrote: "Narcissism" is a term "to denote the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated ..."<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud has dealt with the concept in great detail in his psychoanalytical theories, from which what might be gathered with regard to Mata Hari is her passion for self-preoccupation. Narcissism or self-love has been focused upon in the field of psychoanalysis and has been defined and technically analyzed variously by many psychologists. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) described narcissism as possessing "grandiose sense of self-importance." According to the noted American psychoanalyst Theodore Isaac Rubin, "The narcissist becomes his own world and believes the whole world in him."<sup>11</sup> This version indicates a narcissist to be extremely self-cen-

10 Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," *On Metapsychology*, 61.

11 Alexander Lowen, *Narcissism: Denial of the True Self*, 6.

tered. Theodore Millon has presented the following five characteristic trends for a narcissist—(i) inflated self-image, manifested through egoist, haughty, and arrogant behavior; (ii) interpersonal exploitativeness, manifested through indulgent behavior and expectation of special favors; (iii) cognitive expansiveness, manifested through exhibiting immature fantasies and undisciplined imagination; (iv) insouciant temperament, manifested through nonchalance and buoyantly optimistic behavior; and (v) deficient social conscience, manifested through flouting conventional rules of shared social living.<sup>12</sup> The well-known American psychologist Otto Friedmann Kernberg however defined narcissism as the libidinal investment of the self. He has significantly noted that a narcissist manifests “great need to be admired, a shallow emotional life, an exploitative and sometime parasitic relationship with others.”<sup>13</sup> He pointed out that to find out the root of narcissistic traits in one’s personality, it is necessary to delve deep into the early childhood of that person, because the child’s “fusion of ideal self, ideal object and actual self-images” are “a defense against an intolerable reality in the interpersonal realm.”<sup>14</sup> A quick look into Mata Hari’s adolescent days may have an answer from Kernberg’s view.

Margarethe’s father had deserted them after his bankruptcy and his eventual legal separation with her mother for another woman had led to her mother’s untimely death. The family was totally disintegrated resulting in unwanted bumps and turns in Margarethe’s life. Longing for her father’s love, care, and comfort went in vain, as if Adam had forgotten his dear “little orchid” completely. It had surely been an “intolerable reality” in her personal life at a very young age. Therefore, as a defense against the intolerable mental agony, it is most likely that her ideal self, ideal object, and actual self-images had been merged together resulting in her narcissistic character traits. For Kernberg, narcissistic personality disorder is a defense of an adult, who, as a child, was left emotionally hungry by the mother, due to which the child felt unloved. So, as the only refuge he or she would choose “some valued aspect of the self as the only defense available.”<sup>15</sup> Margarethe’s mother became seriously ill immediately after

12 Theodore Millon, “Narcissistic Personality,” *Encyclopedia of Psychology* (Vol. 2), Raymond J. Corsini, ed. 417.

13 Ibid., 417.

14 Otto Friedmann Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*, 231.

15 J. Lachkar, *The Narcissistic/Borderline Couple: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on*

Adam's bankruptcy and eventually had died within 2 years never being able to cope with the series of inappropriate happenings in her life. Adam did not take the responsibility of Antje's treatment, nor of the requirements (emotional and material) of Margarethe, who had deep attachment with him. She was deprived of the parental love and care that she had yearned for. Therefore, it is quite comprehensible that the only refuge she could possibly choose as a defense was self-love. When she was no more special for anyone else, she had to be special for herself. Adam had pampered her with luxury, and thus she might have equated luxury with fatherly love, care, and security. As had been evident later in her life, she always enjoyed men's love and attraction for her, more specifically of those in uniform, and an affluent life full of all material provisions. It must have certainly been rooted in her childhood mental state of unresolved helplessness.

<p><b>ONS MERK</b></p> <p>Elscht dit!!</p> <p>30 Damrak,</p>	<p><b>Amsterdamsche Droogdok-Maatschappij.</b></p> <p>Aan Houders van de Obligatien Nos. 274, 278, 284 en 404 wordt herinnerd, dat huns stukken, in Mei en November A. P. uitgeloot, nog niet ter aflossing zijn aangeboden en hierles nog daerzels gelegenheid bestaat ten kantore der <i>Actio-Forensij</i>.</p> <p>Amsterdam, Februari 1895.</p>	<p><b>T. C. A. B.</b></p> <p>(5290) Tax</p> <p><b>Verloren</b></p> <p>in de Roemer Vlasche nabij, of in het Centraal groot doukerstein. De Ruime belooning bij geringe Roemer Vlascheren.</p>
<p><b>30 Damrak,</b></p>	<p><b>DAMES!</b></p> <p>Een Officier van het O.-I.-L. met verlof h. t. l. zoekt in kennis te komen met Jonge Dame of Wed. v. K. van goeden huize, om na nodere kennismaking, Hovelijk aan te gaan. Eenig fortuin wenschelk. Sicke schielmh. verzocht en verzekerd. Hr. met portret (dat stillig weest) terugzeggende onderlett. N N 40.</p> <p>Nieuws van den Dag.</p>	<p><b>VROUWENSP!</b></p> <p>Geopereerde Sij Blusieke Kra <b>JULIUS AD</b></p>
<p><b>TE KOOP:</b></p> <p>Een welk Engelsche <b>BULLDOG</b>, geel gestroomd, met dubb. mensgoed gevoerd. Res. 68 cm. hoog, 1 st. velsch, lief v. kind. Pri. motto „Dog“, N. v. d. Daj.</p> <p><b>DARREN</b></p> <p>Dinonbrug, Prijs en Premio, ag 12 Febr. a. s. op</p>	<p><b>Alkmaar.</b></p> <p><b>HARDRIJDERU</b></p> <p>op Schaatsen.</p> <p>vanwege de alomere Hezel, op de Singelrecht, op Maandag 11 Februari, voor Mannen boven de 17 Jaar, om drie gilleren Medailles. De baan is ongeveer 160 M. lang.</p>	<p><b>AL</b></p> <p>geheele Uitwerk Wintermantels, Ste. <b>OLDEWELA-MEIS</b> 1888, Vijzelstraat</p> <p><b>Exporthandel V</b></p> <p>Men vraagt solide van gelicke Varkens en ook voor vette Slag Adr. in met oostind lettere G. A. 73, N. 101</p>

Marriage advertisement of March 11, 1895  
*Het Nieuw van den Dag*, The Netherlands (Internet archive, no known copyright)

<p>AMSTERDAM, 11 Juli 1895.</p>	<p>(15421)</p>
<p>Getrouwd:</p>	
<p><b>R. MAC-LEOD,</b> Kapt. Inf, O.-I. L.,</p>	
<p>EN <b>MARGARETHA GEERTRUIDA ZELLE.</b></p>	
<p>De Heer en Mevrouw MAC-LEOD bedanken voor de vele bewijzen van hartelijke belangstelling, bij gelegenheid van hun Huwelijk ondervonden.</p> <p>AMSTERDAM, 11 Juli 1895. (15514)</p>	

Announcement of marriage on July 11, 1895  
*Algemeen Handelsblad*, Amsterdam (Internet archive, no known copyright)

*Marital Treatment*, 9.

After reaching The Hague at her uncle Mr. Taconis' house (1893), Margarethe had realized that it was not what she had dreamt her life to be. Hopping from one relative's house to another was quite boring and tiring for her. She wanted to live a life of her own. As she was not ready to take up a job to support herself, which had absolutely been on line with the middle-class societal custom of her time, she had thought of marriage as the only option. In her imagination, only marriage could give her the security and opulence she had been looking for. So, it is not hard to assume that the decision for marriage had primarily been her economic compulsion. Later she had revealed to a journalist, "I married to become happier."<sup>16</sup> It was quite normal for a girl of 17 to think that way. The Hague had been a coastal spa city where soldiers and officers in uniform used to throng during their holidays, and for Margarethe the sight had been exceedingly attractive. Meeting Rudolf Macleod (then 39 years old) for the first time (he came in his uniform) on March 24, 1895, through a matrimonial advertisement (March 11, 1895) and courting him for a couple of months before getting married to him on July 11, 1895, had been like a fairy tale for Margarethe. Rudolf had provided her with every luxury she had dreamt of, and their courtship had exceeded all social norms to being intimately physical as well. At 18 she had been very beautiful and highly attractive by all measures, and for a middle-aged officer who had spent nearly 18 years in the Dutch East Indies serving in the Colonial Army (Rudolf went there in 1877 at the age of 21), Margarethe's attraction and accessibility had been irresistible. Rudolf had appreciated her sexual confidence as well, which stands evidence to the fact that she did not have any social or moral scruples. With Rudolf, Margarethe had seemed to be on top of the world ever since Adam had left her. She was fatally attracted to the man in uniform who was almost 21 years' senior to her. Did Margarethe consciously try to find the shadow of her father in Rudolf?

Pat Shipman presented Margarethe's possible mental state quite vividly—"If she were to create in her mind a man who would restore her golden past, he would be an older man, a handsome man in uniform, like her father on his horse in the painting that hung in their house in Leeuwarden. He would be a man who would treat her like a princess. She was consciously looking for such a man, because she was seeking

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16 Wheelwright, *op. cit.*, 10.



Rudolf and Margarethe after the wedding  
(The Mata Hari Foundation, Fries Museum, Leeuwarden)

to re-create her father's magical love during her childhood ..."<sup>17</sup> I agree with Shipman on her comments in this regard, but I presume Margarethe had not been doing anything consciously as the psychoanalysts would also agree to. It must have been her subconscious mental state which had prompted her to go for such a choice. After all she had yearned for her father's love and care for much long. Had Rudolf not showered her with expensive gifts and luxurious niceties, she might presumably have backed out. Margarethe had been too naïve to foresee what fate she was embracing so dearly. If only she did not lose her head during the courtship she might have realized that Rudolf enjoyed female company very much and had been known among his colleagues for being a womanizer, which might have even affected his health. It was not uncommon among the army ranks in the Dutch colonies, or for that matter for any colonial people, to have native women as their sexual partners in their colonies. Margarethe had been too young to even have any idea about all these menaces, and worst, she did not even have a guardian to warn her of the consequences.

Rudolf was on leave from January 1894, and as his health had been deteriorating steadily he had started for The Netherlands for proper cure in June. He had been suffering from acute diabetes and severe joint pains

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<sup>17</sup> Shipman, *op. cit.*, 12.

due to rheumatism. His illness was so severe that on the day he was to take the ship from the Dutch East Indies he actually had to be carried on a stretcher to board the ship. Back in Holland for nearly a year and even after getting engaged to Margarethe, he had often suffered recurring spells of unbearable rheumatic pain, and therefore could not go out to meet her on those occasions. Shipman raised the question whether Rudolf was physically suited to marry by then. She speculated that he might have been affected by syphilis, and might not have been cured completely only after a year of treatment. Syphilis had been a common disease among the army men and planters who lived without their families for long periods in the Indies. It is well known that Rudolf was a womanizer who enjoyed physical company of the native women in the Indies before he had known Margarethe; moreover, as a custom, he had kept nyais (housekeepers and companions) in his living quarter to take care of his material and sexual needs. Although syphilis had been part of the Columbian Exchange, it had in fact been transmitted from the New World to the Old World, and had been carried over to the East Indies particularly by the Europeans. It is however not at all absurd that Rudolf might also have been infected. Shipman wrote: "Circumstantial evidence suggests strongly that he had suffered from syphilis, and this scenario would explain much that has remained mysterious about the married life of Margarethe."<sup>18</sup> The circumstantial evidences collected by her are—(i) Rudolf's medical problems; (ii) his unfaithfulness; (iii) the letter of Margarethe written to her father on August 3, 1901;<sup>19</sup> and (iv) the peculiar circumstances of his infant son Norman's death. The symptoms of syphilis closely correspond to those that Rudolf had been suffering from—diabetes and rheumatic pain. In an article titled "Syphilis in its Relation to Diabetes" (*The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, July 1892, Vol. 17 (7), 521-524), Edward D. Fisher had speculated that only in the third stage of syphilis does diabetes occur. So it could be asserted that Rudolf was affected by the disease and had been suffering for quite a long time, and therefore had urgently needed leave to get back to Holland for proper cure.

Whatever might have happened Margarethe had indeed been infected, which is known through her letters to Adam from the Dutch East Indies. Norman, the first child of Margarethe and Rudolf, was born on January 30, 1897, nearly a year and a half after their marriage. By that time

18 Ibid., 32.

19 Ibid., 125.

Rudolf's leave had been extended twice—in March 1896, for reasons relating to his health, and in September the same year due to Margarethe's pregnancy. So, it is evident that Rudolf was not fully cured even after a year of their engagement in March 1895. Therefore, it would not be wrong to conclude that Norman might have had congenital syphilis of some kind. Shipman surmised that Norman had died not directly suffering from the disease, but from the poisonous overdose of mercury while getting treated for syphilis.<sup>20</sup> It could be true even for Non (the girl), who was born on May 2, 1898, after nearly 3 years of their marriage and 15 months after birth of the first child. She too had died untimely in her early 20s. Not much light has been shed regarding her death on August 10, 1919, at the age of 21, besides merely being known that she had died in sleep of cerebral hemorrhage. Charles Robert Drysdale's statement about the nature of syphilis is fairly significant in this regard. He said, "Persons with inherited syphilis do not seem to reach old age, and probably die of some disease of liver or kidneys in middle age."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it could be presumed that both the children had suffered from congenital syphilis.

However, Rudolf had reached Java with his wife and the little son in June 1897, and in May 1899, the MacLeods were in Medan. Late in June 1899, both the children had fallen seriously ill. While the girl had survived (despite being only 13 months old), the poor boy was betrayed by his luck. Norman had died very early on June 28, 1899, and the story about Norman's death had circled around the children being poisoned for revenge—either because Rudolf had abused a native soldier who was in love with their maid and therefore she took revenge by poisoning the children; or because Rudolf's sexual advances towards the maid had enraged her native lover who had poisoned the children for revenge.<sup>22</sup> Nearly all the biographers of Margarethe, including her father, and even the Dutch colonial people residing in the Dutch-Indies at that time, had believed the story. Whatever might have happened, the body essentially required a post mortem to determine the genuine cause of the kid's death. Rudolf did not permit an autopsy, which provides ample scope for suspicion—did he know the precise cause of Norman's death and was desperate to suppress fact to prevent an inquiry? A proper inquiry could have revealed that he had married while still having the symptoms of syphilis, and thus

20 Ibid., 103–106.

21 Charles R. Drysdale, *The Nature and Treatment of Syphilis*, 126.

22 Pat Shipman extensively argued against such possibility; *op. cit.*, 99–103.

had infected the children. Shipman has pointed out that their symptoms of high fever, frequent vomiting, etc did match mercury poisoning,<sup>23</sup> an element used in those days for the treatment of syphilis.

Could then the story of revenge have been invented by Rudolf himself in connivance with the Dutch doctor, who had been treating the children, in order to shift the blame on the helpless native maid? The revenge story was never verified and the Dutch press in the East Indies did not publish anything other than merely reporting the little boy's unfortunate death. But Rudolf had subsequently been demoted from his position and was transferred back to East Java, which was somewhat unusual in the Dutch colonial system. Did it result from serious suspicion against Rudolf regarding the toddler's death at the upper ranks of the Dutch army? Never was it known who had been the lover of the maid, and what treatment did they get for such kind of a grave destructive behavior involving death of the little child of a colonial army personnel. Had the revenge story been true it would have implied severe punishment of the perpetrators, but nothing of that sort had ever been recorded in the government documents of the Dutch East Indies. Rudolf at times had even blamed Margarethe for having contracted syphilis from some other men and having passed it on to the children at their birth, which could have never been true. Unlike Rudolf she did not show signs of promiscuity during her marriage.

There could have been another angle to Norman's death. In 1898 Rudolf had been promoted to the post of Garrison Commander, and was posted in Medan, the biggest port and capital town of Sumatra, which had predominantly been under Muslim rule. He had arrived in the city sometime in March 1899, and took the charges immediately. Due to his disgusting and thoroughly oppressive behavior towards the local plantation labors he was greatly hated by them. Margarethe had joined him with the two little children in the insistence of Rudolf. In no time she had realized that the social atmosphere was not conducive for the Dutch people residing in the city. The local ethnic groups of the Aceh and Batak people of Northern Sumatra had not been happy with the colonial people, because their presence had affected the natives' spice business badly, and therefore were considered to be intruders into the natives' own land. The Bataks were very aggressive and had also been known for their ritual cannibalism.<sup>24</sup>

23 Ibid., 103–112.

24 Khoon Choy Lee, *A Fragile Nation*, 269.

Both the groups had resisted foreign intrusion indulging in guerrilla warfare (Jihad for them), which involved high levels of atrocities against the Dutch colonials.<sup>25</sup> The latter had declared war against the Aceh Sultanate in the end of March 1873. It is known in history as the Aceh (Atjeh) War, which had continued for an amazing four decades. It was in 1898 that the Dutch colonial people had caused death to nearly 3,000 native Acehs, including women and children, in a counter-insurgency move. So, when Margarethe went to live in Medan in May 1899, the situation was still not favorable for the resident Dutch families, and there had been a persistent need to be vigilant all the time against any fatal attack on them. It is in Medan that Norman had died in the wee hours of June 28, 1899. In that case the story of poisoning the children could very well be true, but for a different reason. Still, Rudolf's refusal to allow an autopsy on Norman's body would remain a mystery.

Nevertheless, Rudolf and Margrethe's conjugal life had started to ruin right after their honeymoon. They had been to the fashionable spa city of Wiesbaden in Germany after the wedding, which was especially known for Mother Buchanan's Bath House and other hot springs (23 in total at that time), and with its pleasing meadows and splendid architecture had been a luxurious destination of the international tourists. There are ample reasons to suspect that as Rudolf still had not been fully cured of syphilis while he married Margarethe, he had chosen Wiesbaden for honeymoon, because the mineral waters there had been known to be useful cure for almost all skin ailments and also for rheumatism.<sup>26</sup> They could however never know the sweetness of an ideal union. There was no dignity and respect in their union—it had been a union of convenience on both sides. I would like to borrow a few words from G. W. Burnap, a Unitarian clergyman of the early nineteenth century, to describe the situation. "No sooner" he wrote: "... her bridal attire transformed into mourning, and her blushes changed into tears."<sup>27</sup> Rudolf had a habit for luxury including heavy drinking. As he was on leave during their wedding, he was not being paid full salary; and due to his heavy expenditure during the courtship and honeymoon, he also had loans to repay. Moreover, he had started seeing other women within merely 2 weeks of

25 Julia Keay, *The Spy Who Never Was*, 22.

26 Anonymous, 1832, *A Guide through Wiesbaden and its Environs*, 21–23; (Pamphlet printed for H. W. Ritter).

27 Burnap, George Washington; *The Sphere and Duties of Woman*, 64.

returning from honeymoon. Having a bourgeois mindset he might have thought that he had the license to do whatever he liked to. He had been promiscuous and did insist his wife to give company to his money lenders in order to evade repayment of loans. On Margarethe's own account their marriage had deteriorated mainly due to the following reasons:<sup>28</sup>

1. Lack of enough money to support her luxury.
2. Rudolf did not approve her flirtatious nature.
3. Rudolf was much older to her and therefore had been jealous of her young male friends who admired her beauty and attractiveness.
4. Due to her individualistic temperament she was not fit to be a good housewife.

The letters written by Rudolf on various occasions to his younger sister Louise Frida had revealed his disgust about Margarethe. His attitude towards his wife had been explicit through the choice of phrases like “a stinking wretch,” “blood-sucker,” “beastly depraved scoundrel,”<sup>29</sup> etc. What had actually been communicated by Rudolf could be stated in the following way—Margarethe had failed to be a “true woman.” Qualities of a “true woman” included modesty, purity, religiosity, submissiveness, domesticity, and complete dependence and devotion to the husband and family. “With them she was promised happiness and power,”<sup>30</sup> said Barbara Welter, the noted feminist historian. Social invisibility had been the most notable feature of a “true woman,” as they were happy within their social and familial boundaries. She was supposed to be a “womanly woman,” a true wife, which Margarethe had never been. She had enjoyed dictating her own terms, and to fulfill her desires she was ready even to step onto the forbidden pastures. She was not born to be “The Angel in the House” (Coventry Patmore, 1854). This disposition in Margarethe infuriated Rudolf because he had expected her to be an infinitely submissive wife, who would be merely a beautiful ornament to the MacLeods' household. He was not ready in any way to admit any value of his wife other than adornment, and had hated her strength of expression. So, for

28 Shipman, *op. cit.*, 52.

29 Waagenaar, *op. cit.*, 1964, 40.

30 Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” Lucy Maddox, ed., *Locating American Studies*, 44; Helen Tierney, ed., *Women's Studies Encyclopedia* (Vol.1), 321.

Rudolf, whatever Margarethe did could only be wrong, and all her decisions were entirely inaccurate. Rudolf did not trust her under any circumstance and had desperately wanted to get rid of her, especially after Norman's death, for which he had always blamed her for being a negligent mother.

Margarethe did not get married to have a family or to rear Rudolf's children. All of what she had in mind while planning for her wedding was to live in freedom and affluence, and to have a husband who would provide that. She had been extremely unhappy with the constant struggle she had to face after her mother's death and wanted to have a pair of imaginary wings to fly high. Did she ever realize the commitments and responsibilities of marriage, and what it meant to have a family? This accusing question has always been pointed toward Margarethe, as if family happiness had been her sole responsibility. In the same vein I would like to pose the same question for Rudolf. Did he ever bother to play the role of a perfect husband with her? The Dutch Law of Persons defines marriage as the union of man and woman, entered into for the purpose of begetting children, and for mutual assistance through life.<sup>31</sup> Did Rudolf truly comply with the latter part of the law? Did he at all have any intention to assist Margarethe through life? Margarethe was even less than half his age. Moreover, she was a motherless teenager when he married her. Did he not have the duty to lovingly initiate her to the duties and responsibilities of a wife? People who knew the couple in the Dutch East Indies had admired Margarethe as an excellent host and as a beautiful well-behaved lady. Only if she had a well-behaved, affectionate, composed and sensible husband she might have become a responsible wife as well. G. W. Burnap wrote: "If there be on both sides good sense and generous feeling, as well as true affection, nothing will seem hard ..."<sup>32</sup> Both Rudolf and Margarethe had lacked all these essential qualities which could make their marriage successful. The marriage had been one which went totally haywire due to misunderstandings at various levels, mostly because they did not want to be considerate enough to understand each other—both had entered the nuptial contract with their own cultural and personal hangovers about the institution, which was a gross mistake, and therefore both were equally responsible. The then European society had been mostly following the Napoleonic Civil Code, which professed subjugation of women

31 J. W. Wessels, *History of the Roman-Dutch Law*, 429.

32 Burnap, *op. cit.*, 65.

by prescribing marriage, family, and children to be their only concern—the roles as wife and mother being supremely important. I would like to assert that the life and death of Margarethe (a.k.a. Mata Hari) had been determined by the male-dominated culture of her time, which held women liable for every social wrong. She was expected to practice the art of suffering in silence, which she had refused to comply with.

Rudolf could bear no more of the Dutch colonial life and particularly the arduous tropical conditions in Indonesia that had instilled a dull unpleasantness in him. Norman's death might have evoked a sense of guilt in him which he could not evade. He missed his dear son too bitterly, and with his failing health he could not continue with his service any longer. In October 1900, he had been released with a pension by the Dutch authority. Margarethe also was no more interested to carry on with Rudolf and with the marriage any longer, and therefore in March 1902, they had decided to return to Holland. On August 27 she had filed for legal separation before the Amsterdam Tribunal on the ground of cruelty and torture, which was granted in 3 days. Margarethe was quite aware that separation from Rudolf would deny her the social rank and standing along with the economic security and comfort that she had enjoyed so far, still she had been desperate to get rid of the monstrous man. She had denied her natural destiny to sculpt a new identity for herself. As a mother she could not overcome the grief of her son's death. Erika Ostrovsky wrote: "She felt as if one half of her body had been ripped away."<sup>33</sup> She had desperately wanted the custody of Non (little over 4 years in 1902) which was granted by the court, but Rudolf had taken the daughter away as he refused to provide anything that could make his wife happy. As he was terribly disgusted with his wife, he grabbed every little chance to humiliate her, both in private and in public. Denouncing her responsibilities he had even published announcements in a leading newspaper in Amsterdam warning all people not to supply Margarethe with cash and goods. It was a measure taken by him to malign his wife publicly, which had left his once dear Griet with no other option whatsoever.

Margarethe knew that she had to start life afresh. She was lonely—terribly lonely—not a single soul to support, no care, no love, not even a single word of solace—she had felt completely alienated. She had then started her journey to find her own identity, to create her own destiny.

33 Erika Ostrovsky, *Eye of Dawn*, 51.

Margarethe loved herself, she dreamt big, and had been audacious enough to claim her right to be treated as a woman. If these were her weaknesses in a fundamentally bourgeois society, she was prepared to change them into her strengths. She only had a gorgeous physique to start with and was determined to exploit it for a dignified living. Her body was her exclusive asset that could become her fortune. She had no other means—no choice left (committing suicide could never have been an option to her as she was not an escapist in any way and loved life too dearly). It had finally marked the end of Margarethe, and then onward her sojourn to create the dream persona of Mata Hari began. At the turn of the century Paris had been a happening city and could have been the only destination for her. In the Spring of 1903, she began with trying her luck there in a circus (Molier Circus) as a rider, did modeling for some painters, tried her hand as a trainer in a riding school, and had taken up part-time prostitution as well (after separation from Rudolf she had been in part-time prostitution for a while in the Van Woustraat, which was known as the red-light area in Amsterdam); but nothing worked out the way she had expected to. Without the support of her husband, without the support of her society, without a family to fall back on, and above all without any money, she had stepped out for the new journey all by herself. It had become her obligation to prove her worth—to Rudolf and his family, especially to his orthodox sister Tante Frida, whom she had held responsible for her disastrous marriage, and to the rest of the merciless world.

The owner of the circus in Paris where Margarethe had started working was Ernst Molier, who had advised her to take up dancing as her career. That piece of advice had created history—it had created Mata Hari (“The Eye of Dawn” in Javanese). It had been during the Belle Époque in France, and Paris was bustling with new artists, poets, musicians, dancers, and others with their novel art forms. Moreover, the Universal Exposition in Paris, held in 1900, had showcased an Oriental theme leaving its Oriental fervor on the French populace. She had started dancing in early 1905 with private performances in the romantic city of Paris, through which she could prove her worth as an extremely attractive dancer with a whole new style of dance—the sacred Hindu temple dance. Being an Indian I have vivid knowledge of what that is like, and therefore can refute her claims of authenticity, because whatever she performed might have had some affinity with the dances from Java and not from India. She bared herself under the garb of divine servitude, and people simply applauded

her artistic display. Paris had already seen other nude performers at the music halls and at Moulin Rouge, but nothing even closer to what Lady MacLeod had been exhibiting in the evenings. She could read the pulse of the Parisian society and its hypocritical bourgeoisie sentiment rightly, and knew that her shows must be cloaked with decency of culture. It had worked for her. She could hit the jackpot through her debut performance at Mrs. Kireevsky's house sometime in early February, 1905. News reporters did not leave the opportunity to enhance sale of their papers. Marcel Lami, correspondent of the *Courrier Francis*, wrote: "... her profane dance is a prayer, her passion is a prayer."<sup>34</sup>

At her debut performance she was noticed by Émile Étienne Guimet, the wealthy collector of classical artifacts from Egypt, Asia, and other regions of the Near East and Far East. He had displayed his collections in a museum in Paris, which had also housed a magnificent Oriental collection. In order to promote his collection, Guimet had invited Margarethe, then known as Mrs. Lady MacLeod, to perform at the library of his museum on March 13 and 14, 1905. A new name became necessary for her public debut, as her Scottish (Rudolf's family originally hailed from Scotland) name was unsuitable for depicting authentic Oriental dance, and thus "Mata Hari" was born. She had mesmerized the audience by dancing before the eleventh century South Indian statue of Natarāja provided from Guimet's collection. The invitees had been enthralled to see her slow and voluptuous movements. Shipman wrote: "Her dances were thrilling, daring, and exotic, and hence were praised by all—even by the newspaper reporters."<sup>35</sup> A new star was shining bright on the horizon (she was conferred the title "A Star of Dance" in 1908 by one of her wealthy admirers). Margarethe Geertruida Zelle, alias Mrs. Lady MacLeod, had found her true identity—Mata Hari. She had achieved her dream never to part with again and thus had chosen her own destiny.

The newly born Mata Hari became an instant craze in Paris. Whatever she did and uttered had started being reported in the leading newspapers—her dining with elite people, living in magnificent hotels, her majestic lifestyle—every bit had intrigued the masses. A Dutch cigarette manufacturer printed her picture on the cigarette tins in the hope to sell well and so did a manufacturer of beauty soap. In the span of only a couple

34 Keay, *op. cit.*, 37.

35 Shipman, *op. cit.*, 152.

## A SKETCH OF LIFE



Artist's impression of Mata Hari in 1905  
(The Mata Hari Foundation, Fries Museum, Leeuwarden)

of months Mata Hari became an icon in France. Soon she had started receiving invitations to perform in Madrid, Milan, Berlin, Venice, London, Nice, Monte Carlo, St Petersburg, and other places of class. She had then felt the need to create a mystery around her because the image of a battered woman could definitely not match her newly created iconic image, and therefore she had started telling imaginary stories to the newspaper reporters fictionalizing her past. She was smart enough to create stories that would authenticate her allegiance to her Oriental dance form. So, in the self-concocted stories for her admirers she had been born in Jaffna Pattanam (Ceylon, renamed Sri Lanka) to a Brahmin father. Her mother had been a temple dancer (*devadāsi*), who died after giving birth to her. She had grown up amidst the glorious culture witnessing and learning temple dance from authentic sources. As a teenager she had been offered to Siva, the Hindu Lord of destruction, who is also the source of all creation. She must have known about the *devadāsi* system of India from the travelogues of Europeans who had lived and worked in India and Ceylon; presumably from the Dutch writings of Jacob Gotfried Haafner,

who had confessed about being infatuated by a devadāsi of Tamil origin, and had elaborated on the Indian devadāsis in his popular book *Travels in a Palanquin* (1808)<sup>36</sup>, and had also written about his travels in Ceylon (*Travels on Foot through the Island of Ceylon*, 1821). Moreover, some real Indian devadāsis had adorned European stages (especially in Paris and London) from the early nineteenth century<sup>37</sup>. Louis Jacolliot, the colonial barrister and judge who had worked in India for several years, contributed to the popularity of the devadāsis in France through his travel document written in French (1877)<sup>38</sup>. So, it would not be wrong to assume that Mata Hari and the Parisians both were familiar with the traditional Indian temple dancers and must have been adequately curious about them. She must have posed some sort of continuity to the Indian temple dancers on the Parisian stage. Her fictitious stories had been so well configured that no one dared to raise any suspicion. Her tanned complexion, black hair and dark eyes endorsed her fabrication, though this fanciful self-mystification had proved to be fatal later in her life.

Chance, or for that matter fate, had played a significant role in all the four lives that Margarethe had lived. On various occasions destiny had been playing a wicked game with her. Being born as the only daughter of a rich businessman, her mother's death at a much early date, being sent to The Hague to live with her orthodox uncle's family, sending a photograph along with her reply to Rudolf's matrimonial advertisement, meeting Émile Guimet at a private performance in Paris, her instant fame—all had been destined for her. As her fame rocketed through countries so did the number of her admirers. It was an era when having mistress had been considered to be a status symbol, and who else than Mata Hari could be more suitable? She had been gorgeous, intelligent, well mannered, a polyglot, and had an elegant lifestyle. She was a *femme galante* in the truest sense. She was gifted with the talent to impress people belonging to the higher strata of the society with much ease; and that is precisely what she liked about herself; she basked in her own glory. Every city she conquered had gifted her with many lovers, who were ready to spend a fortune for her. Men and dance had become the dual source of her sustenance. She stayed lavishly in expensive hotels and villas, was assisted by servants and

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36 Martin Clayton and Bennett Zon, eds., *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s–1940s*, 47.

37 *Ibid.*, 55–61.

38 *Ibid.*, 67.

maids, had enjoyed delicious platters for luncheons and dinners, bought the latest fashionable clothing from the renowned dress makers, collected jewelry and shoes at her own fancy, and rode the best breed of horses. At last she could achieve what she had always wanted to, could make her dreams come true, and could enjoy life in her own terms to her own satisfaction. She became a princess once again, for her lovers and her admirers. Everyone who came to watch her performances or read about her in the newspapers and magazines wanted to be her lover—wanted to be special to her, though only a few had been fortunate. The fortunate ones, with a few exceptions, most significantly had been in uniform. Least did she realize that her passion for uniform would turn into her death trap within a span of merely ten years.

Rudolf could not have been happy with the success of the incorrigibly evil, dishonorable, fallen woman, a captive of her own sensuous passions, he had known two years back. The sexual confidence that he had appreciated and enjoyed during his courtship days had eventually been the cause for hatred towards his estranged wife. And as he was prepared to marry again (his second wife Elisabetha Martina Christina van der Mast was 28 years his junior), he had appealed to the court of law in Amsterdam for a divorce. The ground for his appeal was Margarethe's infidelity and malicious desertion. To be sure Rudolf did not forget to collect and attach a nude photograph of Mata Hari along with his divorce petition, which had been clicked by a renowned photographer (some of the well-known photographers of her time were Leopold Reutlinger, Professor Edward Stebbing, Jean Agérou, and Lucien Walery) in Paris after her success on stage. One of her photographs had tied the knot with him, and to end the relationship he had resorted to another. However, initially Margarethe did not want a divorce as the legal separation had been serving her purpose quite well, but due to fear of a scandal which could have become a scorn for her career as well as for her daughter's reputation she had decided not to contest. Mata Hari knew that adultery had always been a justified ground for divorce, and she could prove her innocence in no way. The divorce was granted in the Amsterdam court on April 26, 1906. Rudolf had married for the second time on November 22, 1907, and again for the third time in 1917, but Mata Hari never married again. The bitter experience of her marriage with Rudolf had drained her courage to opt for the nuptial bond one more time. She was sufficiently happy with her life as Mata Hari, and could never love anyone more than herself (save once

at the mature age of 40). Her journey had continued through Europe as “Mata Hari” for 10 more years. She had started her career with what she called the Hindu temple dances and had carefully created opportunities on stage to show her spectacular nudity to captivate her audience. She was not a trained dancer and might have guessed that it was the only way to conquer the game. By no means could she afford to lose.

But France was not in a mood to allow that for long, as the French censors had been shadowing the bourgeoisie ideology and had worked to uplift the café-concerts and music halls in the view to shape the society with moral citizens. Government-appointed moral police frequented the theaters and music halls to find any deviant, who were arrested and imprisoned for 15 days as per the existing law. In order to pursue her career, Mata Hari had to abide by the current norms of the country, and thus she was seen in full clothes at her latter public performances. It was somewhat good for her as well, because she had already been aging and had feared that her erotic appeals might have feigned. As she had many wealthy lovers it was no more necessary for her to perform for a living. She performed at various benefit events during that time, and private garden parties as well including some at her villa in Neuilly-sur-Seine. She had also performed (1912) with the orchestration of the Indian Sufi mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan. During that time Inayat Khan had been traveling in America and Europe with the mission to spread Sufism in the west, and in 1912 had settled in Paris. She had once performed in a dance recital in Neuilly at the famous salon of Natalie Clifford Barney, the renowned feminist, where she had spectacularly rode nude on a white horse into the garden as Lady Godiva.<sup>39</sup> On December 13, 1913, she had assisted music critic Paul Oliver by demonstrating for his lecture at the University of Annals in Paris on the subject of Indian, Javanese, and Japanese temple dances. It is quite amazing because she had no formal training in any dance form, but still was fortunate enough to have a chance to impress the academia of Paris. Her superb reputation as a dancer enabled her earnings to swell, but no amount of wealth was sufficient for her as she had been ridiculously self-indulgent and extravagant in her ways, and although she earned much she would soon have huge loans. Some of the newspaper reports suggested that she was the highest paid dancer of her time, and she had no dearth of wealthy lovers who had been supporting her lavishly in every way; still she always needed more. Her self-image as

39 Joan Schenkar, *Truly Wilde*, 144.

if had solely rested on her capacity to buy.

Mata Hari's success nevertheless had generated many enemies, and she was condemned as a "vicious man eater"—a man-devouring woman who ruined men financially; truly, because to keep her in good humor, her patrons and lovers had to spend a fortune. She flaunted her grandeur publicly and had no qualms to show off that she was too expensive, still men wanted her as their mistress because she had truly been the paragon of male fantasy. She certainly did not barge into any man's life, but that did not prevent her rivals from maligning her. The wives felt threatened by her irresistible fatal attraction that engulfed their husbands, and the husbands felt intrigued by her gallant personality. She had stepped into the male world and had uncovered their fantasy, which they had been carefully suppressing under the garb of civility. With Rudolf Margarethe had a deep feeling of rejection, which, as the proud demimondaine Mata Hari, she wanted to avenge by choosing lovers particularly in uniform, who would joyfully be willing to become dead broke for her. She had been exceptionally confident of her seductive prowess and ignored all criticisms with grace. She had no more been a daughter, a wife, or a mother, and therefore did not need to have any semblance of social decency. She had become the shadow of Ūrvashi, the infinitely charming celestial nymph, of the Indian Vedic mythology. She felt liberated as men could no more enchain her; on the contrary, it was she who enslaved them by enkindling their lust and by satisfying their savage instincts. After all she had been able to subjugate the male world, no matter what Rudolf and his widowed sister had thought of her.

As Mata Hari traveled to many countries with her dance contracts, she had the opportunity to have foreign lovers. While in Berlin in 1906, she had been the mistress of Herr Alfred Kiepert, a lieutenant in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company of the 11<sup>th</sup> Westphalian Hussars Regiment, Crefeld Garrison, from the Imperial German Army. They were often seen dining together in expensive restaurants and other public places, and with him she had also attended the Imperial Army Manoeuvres at Javer-Streigan in Silesia from September 9 to 12, 1906. As any sort of display in uniform fascinated her, she obviously had enjoyed the event very much. Mata Hari never had the faintest idea that her presence at the show with Kiepert would be used as evidence against her later in her life. She however had soon realized that her performances were losing attraction among the

Parisian audience, and inspite of being an untrained dancer she had tried to explore new dance styles. She had an insatiable urge to remain attractive forever, and therefore in 1907 had traveled to Egypt to learn something new. During that time she might have been in the company of Kiepert for a few months. Some of the newspapers had reported—“She has renounced Shiva and his cult ... she has adopted Berlin and speaks German without the slightest Oriental accent ... she hopes to settle on the banks of the Spree.”<sup>40</sup> Waagenaar said that it had been reported as part of a message sent from the Italian intelligence service to Paris, which he had found to be spurious. However, after her return from Egypt Mata Hari had parted with her rich lover Kiepert, and he had to part with a share of his wealth as her farewell gift; although, at a later date, she had a chance to revive the relationship for a short while. In 1914 Mata Hari had returned to Berlin with a 6 month dance contract at the Metropol Theater, and a wish to create a new Egyptian Ballet with the help of Egyptologist Professor Johann Adolf Erman (Émile Guimet’s old friend), director of the Egyptian department at the Royal Museum in Berlin. Her performance at the Metropol had been scheduled to start in September. She had to stay in Berlin for a couple of months and had been the mistress of Constant Bazet, a banker in Berlin, but still she had renewed her relationship with Herr Kiepert, inspite of knowing about his beautiful and jealous wife. Mata Hari had been, in a sense, unknowingly inviting trouble for herself, as their intimacy was no more secret to Kiepert’s wife, and in order to get rid of the menacing woman she had surely tried out some tricks.

Thus, briefly elucidating Margarethe’s life, I would now like to embark on the climax of her career, i.e., the issue of her alleged enemy espionage and execution by the French government. It was quite customary for a demimondaine to have a lover and also to venture out with other men at the same time. So, at the end of July 1914, and early in August, Mata Hari was seen dining with Herr Griebel, the Chief of Police in Berlin, who had been acquainted to her earlier. Fate had again played the nemesis. Later, during her trial, her association with the German police chief became very important to her prosecutors. On August 3, 1914, when the expansive grape vines in the European fields were almost ready for harvest, Germany had declared war against Russia and France. Britain had joined its allies. The theater halls had closed immediately, and Mata Hari had

40 Ostrovsky, *op. cit.*, 79; Waagenaar, *op. cit.*, 1964, 132.

to get out of Germany violating the dance contract. Certain things had happened quickly at the outbreak of war, which she did not like—while her agent had held back her money, the costumer, who was supposed to be paid by her after the performances, had wrongfully confiscated her valuable furs and jewelry due to nonpayment of his charges, and because she was a resident of France her bank account had also been freed in Germany. In a hurry she had initially planned to go back to Paris through Switzerland, but because of some technical trouble at the border regarding her passport and permit she could not. Ultimately, after a couple of days, she had landed in Amsterdam with the help of a Dutchman. The political upheaval had disgusted Mata Hari not because she was worried about the consequences of a devastating war, but because her movement and enjoyment both had been restricted by the war.

However, all had been going well for Mata Hari even after the war began. She had Baron Edouard Willem van der Capellen, a colonel in the Dutch Cavalry (Hussar Regiment), as her lover in The Hague who had been taking good care of all her needs, and a dedicated and caring maid Antje Lintjens, an unwed mother, who had been meticulously looking after her domestic chores. With the help from her lover she had rented a house in the picturesque locale of The Hague at Nieuwe Uitleg and had started to renovate it. On August 11, 1915, she was registered as a resident of The Hague at the Vital Statistics Office of Holland. Nothing should have gone wrong for her. The war was supposed to end in a short time, but lingered on unexpectedly. As she always loved to be in the limelight, she could not stay idle during the war. She continued with some sporadic performances in Holland,<sup>41</sup> although it was not at all necessary for her survival. Fate once again had pushed her into grave trouble and due to the war it had been the fatal one. After nearly a year of the start of the Great War she was contacted by Karl Kroemer, the German Consul in Amsterdam, with the proposal of spying for Germany. In late 1914, he might have spotted her at some of her performances in Holland,<sup>42</sup> and might have thought of the opportunity to explore the possibility as he had been a member of the German intelligence service for a long time (which

41 Waagenaar, *op. cit.* 1964, 126.

42 There are varied opinions regarding their first meeting. Waagenaar said that Mata Hari had been introduced to Kroemer in January 1915 by one of her acquaintances; *ibid.*, 237; although according to Julia Keay he had met her at a dinner party in May 1916; *op. cit.*, 112; Eva Horn opined that they had met at a reception in Den Haag (The Hague); *The Secret War*, 183.

was being commanded by Walter Nicolai, head of the German intelligence service, during the war) and was in charge of recruiting spies for his country. Kroemer might have thought that Mata Hari could become a local small-time recruit to serve as an informer. She was not in a position even to realize the outcome of that fatal communication. A series of naïve decisions taken at the wrong time had pushed her into the death trap. Britain, France, and even Germany had accomplished their own political interests by entrapping her. Fate did not extend any support to her either, and ultimately she became a scapegoat in the hands of the French army during the First World War.

While being free from any inhibition whatsoever and prepared to inquire with an open mind I had started reading about Mata Hari, I found many hidden layers that had interacted together against her at varied levels—religious, social, psychological, and albeit political. Right from the religio-social bias of anti-Semitism and anti-feminism, pressure of the divergent views of the conservative and republican France, her story had a dimension for revenge as well, and it had ultimately been the adverse political situation of wartime France which had culminated in her execution. I have tried to organize the chapters accordingly. In the first chapter I would like to discuss the socio-cultural background of the European society, especially of Britain and France, in the late nineteenth century and at the turn of the new century, as it appears to bear much importance in the study of Mata Hari's fateful life. The society and culture of her birthplace, her schooling, influence of the Napoleonic Code on the society and its values, anti-Semitism and anti-feminism in the French bourgeois society, emergence of the New Woman against the True Woman, her success as an Oriental dancer, espionitis (collective fear of disguised enemies<sup>43</sup>) that had grabbed Europe during the turn of the century, and social turbulences during the Great War in Europe—all seems to be quite pertinent to her predicament. In the second chapter I propose to elaborate on the persona of Margarethe and Rudolf, which would be significant to interpret their relationship in the unfortunate marriage and also the end of it. In this chapter, I would also like to reflect on Adam Zelle in an effort to understand Mata Hari more vividly. In the third chapter I would like to take up Paris during the Belle Époque as the backdrop of the entire narrative, and to discuss why Margarethe had chosen Paris to start her new life. This chapter would also include some detail about her contemporary

43 Horn, *op. cit.*, 169.

danseuses and their individual dance styles as compared to that of Mata Hari. In the fourth chapter I would discuss the socio-political scenario in Europe that had led to the army mutiny in France during the war. Issues like the Dreyfus Affair and the execution of Edith Cavell and others who had suffered in the hands of Germany would pertinently be discussed in this chapter. In the fifth chapter I would discuss about the grave miscarriage of justice and her being a scapegoat of France during the Great War, and also her activities during that time. In the sixth chapter I would discuss about the role of anti-propaganda, her pre-trial and trial, the accusations against her along with her defense, and her execution—all the issues would be taken up for discussion in this chapter. Since nothing after October 15, 1917, apart from her infamy as a notorious spy, is relevant to this effort, in the concluding chapter I propose to make an effort towards a paradigm shift regarding the universal negative judgment of Mata Hari's role in the war as the *Mata Hari Syndrome*. I propose to add three appendices to this biography, in the first of which I would provide a timeline of her life spanning from her birth to her execution, in the second I would provide a list of her mistakes committed throughout her life, avoidance of which could have surely changed her life story, and in the third I would try to enlist names of her lovers as far as possible.

However, whatever had happened has made Mata Hari immortal in time, and beyond the French imaginations, a heroine forever. She may not have deserved all that—Margarethe may not have deserved to become Mata Hari, and Mata Hari certainly did not deserve to die at the execution ground. I suppose she has become immortal because she had been wronged, because she had suffered injustice. Had she been a prototype of “The Angel in the House” she would have been lost in the crowd, and no one would ever be interested in her story. I strongly believe that she is remembered because she was a heretic. I would nevertheless like to borrow a few lines from “Return into Time” penned by the famous Austrian writer and poet Karl Kraus,<sup>44</sup> although in a varied circumstance, and would also like to imagine that these lines had been uttered by Mata Hari at some point in time—

My watch is turned backward

Never is what's past over for me

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44 W. R. Everdell, *The First Moderns*, 13.

ONE LITTLE ORCHID

And I stand differently in time.

Whatever future I may reach

And whatever I grasp for the first time

Becomes for me the past.

In October 2017, after a century of her execution, The Netherlands would certainly commemorate her sacrifice with much enthusiasm and glamour, and in the other corner of the globe, in the country she spoke of so dearly for being born in, i.e., in India, no one would even care to discuss her. The story of innocent “little orchid” Margarethe and her miserably fateful end truly pained me, and this is an effort on my part to pay her a humble tribute on the occasion of her death centenary.





THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CANVAS  
OF THE FATEFUL DRAMA

Margarethe was born in Leeuwarden during the last quarter of the nineteenth century (1876). Leeuwarden was the capital city of Friesland in the northwestern region of The Netherlands, which had been witnessing development of a secular culture. Although a predominantly bourgeois society, the country had been undergoing novel experiences of vertical pluralism or “pillarization” (*Verzuiling*) since the second half of the nineteenth century. It has been described as a structural phenomenon, “... a way in which religion or denominations organized themselves, even within those institutional spheres which are not primarily connected to religion.”<sup>1</sup> It had been segregation of public life and a way to handle religious diversity within society. Pillarization had been a kind of modernization of the Dutch society through the emergence of socio-political formations along religious and ideological lines. The renowned Dutch sociologist J. P. Kruijt has identified the most important motives behind the phenomenon as—emancipation, protection, social control, conflict regulation, and response to modernization.<sup>2</sup> In The Netherlands there had been four pillars—Catholics, Protestants, Socialists, and Liberals. However, as a capital town, Leeuwarden had been quite a flourishing region brimming with wealthy residents. The area is geographically surrounded by water of the Wadden Sea, but that did not restrict its extensive commerce. Local people traded effectively giving them enough wealth to maintain a prosperous living status. The traditional costume used by the women of Leeuwarden, complete with heavy gold ornaments and a helmet-like unique head dress (*Oorijzer*) made of gold and decorated with a forehead ornament, had very much reflected the prosperity of the region. Jewelers, silversmiths, and goldsmiths had been quite famous in Leeuwarden for centuries. It was due to the wealthy people around that Adam’s hat shop had been doing good business, and he might have nurtured the desire of

1 Jacob A. Belzen, ed., *Psychohistory in Psychology of Religion*, 211.

2 Belzen, *Towards Cultural Psychology of Religion*, 220.

## ONE LITTLE ORCHID

being noticed and acclaimed by them. His expensive lifestyle and novel gifts to little Margarethe would surely support the state of his mind. It is most likely that Margarethe's mother, as the wife of a wealthy businessman who loved to be called a "Baron" and had believed himself to have belonged to the aristocrat circle, had also used an *Oorijzer*; and I presume that Margarethe's love for jewelry might have been inspired by her childhood images of the aristocrat ladies of Leeuwarden.



A mannequin displayed in the gold headgear of Friesland (*Oorijzer*);  
Internet archive, no known copyright

However, as the daughter of a successful businessman she was sent to Miss Buys' school—the best private school in the town. Girl's education during the nineteenth century had been at the preliminary stage and therefore did not develop any individual character. There had mainly been three types of schools in The Netherlands—the French schools or the elementary schools, the Higher Burgher Schools (HBS), or the secondary schools which offered modern curriculum of various science subjects including mathematics and economics, along with foreign languages for the boys in order to prepare them for some position in the industrial society. Therefore, these schools had not been considered to be fit for the girls, although a few of them did in fact attend HBS before 1867. Finally, there had been the Latin schools, which were exclusively for boys, where they were prepared for university. Although girls received education on various subjects like history, geography, hygiene, arts and crafts, etc at the elementary level, the French schools for girls had essentially taught French language, which was in vogue those days, and had also taught embroidery. The pivotal concept of girls' education had been guided by their gender-specific role for future motherhood. It is not particularly known whether the elementary schools for the girls in The Netherlands

had any system to evaluate the students through examinations, or if so then how Margarethe had fared in the examinations at Miss Buys' school, although, as Waagenaar wrote: "she had continued her studies at the high school for girls on the Groote Houtstraat."<sup>3</sup> Not much is known about her schools, like when those had been established, how many teachers were appointed, how many students were admitted every year, what had been the school timing, or whether any sort of sports and games had been taught to the girls or not, etc. Waagenaar wrote that Miss Buys' school admitted girls from the socially established middle-class and upper middle-class families of Leeuwarden. It is also not known what kind of relationship Margarethe had shared with the teachers. She was different from all others in her own way, and according to one of her classmates who had written the following lines for her at a young age—"Amidst a thousand dandelions, one shining orchid stands."<sup>4</sup>

None of these things however had attracted little Margarethe. School, for her, had primarily been a place where, unlike others, she could show off her remarkably beautiful and flamboyant dresses to her peers and admirers, and also could brandish her other prized possessions gifted by her father. Her bold and beautiful cursive handwriting was albeit admired by one and all in her school, as is evident from some of her friends' statements at a much later date. Writing couplets for the friends and exchanging them had been a common game among young girls in those days, and Margarethe had indulged in it quite frequently. Some of her friends had even carefully preserved few of her couplets gifted to them during their schooldays. Waagenaar wrote about one of her friends Mrs. Ybeltje Kerkhof-Hoogslag, who had actually presented him with one of the poems penned by Margarethe at the age of 12, while they had still been studying in Miss Buys' school.<sup>5</sup> Although, according to them, she had a flair for languages and music, she was never known to be meritorious or even studious for that matter. That was not something expected from a girl of her age either, as it was not the call of the time. Girls had ideally been prepared for domesticity and motherhood in the European society as they were expected only to become the helpmates of their husbands; and even if middle-class or upper middle-class women required to work for a respectable living it had necessarily to be about teaching

3 Waagenaar, *op. cit.*, 1964, 19.

4 *Ibid.*, 20.

5 *Ibid.*, 19.

in Kindergarten schools, which had become popular due to Friedrich Fröebel's model of child education. It had been due to this reason that the Vissers at Sneek had sent Margarethe to a teacher training school to prepare her as a future Kindergarten teacher.

There had plausibly been another angle to this choice of job by women, which might be mentioned pertinently. In the Dutch society, men had discouraged women to work outside the home on a regular basis, because that implied compromising with child care and domestic chores, which had been the sole responsibility of women, especially of married women. Moreover, men were worried about morals of women who would be free from their control at workplace for at least a considerable time of the day. It was a common social understanding that without any surveillance women might go astray. Close proximity assured control over the wife, lack of which had been cause for suspicion regarding her sexual promiscuity. Betty A. DeBerg aptly wrote: "Women's morality was important to men also because it eased the doubts men had about their own sexuality... Since men could not really be manly and preach sexual restraint, it fell to the women to be the guardians of decency. A man worried about controlling his sexual drives could place that burden on women and feel safer from the sin always lurking in him."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, for a woman, participation in the economic and productive world outside the private domain was seen as mark of a drastic shift from virtuous womanhood. Woman had been considered morally superior only within the boundaries of her domestic sphere. The cultural prejudice was nothing new to the European homes, and because women's position had been subordinated even by the law, they had no other option than to endure. Teaching in a Kindergarten school meant dealing with small children who required motherly care, and hence was seen as an extension of their ideal role of motherhood which, men had significantly thought, women could perform with comfort. The only other profession for respectable middle-class women was nursing, as it had involved their service as care givers. Florence Nightingale had made efforts to establish nursing training schools in England quarter of a century before and had shown to the Europeans that it was a noble profession which involved all the feminine aptitudes of compassion, sacrifice, and devotion. As nursing required women to provide motherly care to the sick, it had been taken as an extension of women's ideal role that was approved by the society. Teaching

6 Betty A. DeBerg, *Ungodly Women*, 21.

and nursing had thus been considered to be the two most feminine jobs suited for middle-class respectable women in Europe. Russell Warren Howe speculated that the two occupations open to women at that time were domestic service and teaching.<sup>7</sup> In my opinion domestic service had not been a choice for the middle-class women who had opted to take up work for a living, although it might have been a choice for women of the underprivileged classes. There were however other fields where women had been working during that era, which included factory work of various kinds, although it had not been quite popular.

However, Margarethe was born and brought up in a simple or nuclear family, consisting of both of her parents and her three brothers. It had been the usual family structure of her home town as elsewhere in the northwestern region of Europe in those days. As the eldest child she did get complete attention of her parents, at least till birth of the second child, and had always been pampered in all possible ways by her wealthy egoist father till his bankruptcy in February 1889. Margarethe was only twelve years and a half at that time. After her mother's death (May 1891) the family had crumbled right away as Adam had never set up any alternative support system for his family. Not much is known about his extended family and his relationship with them, although he had three sisters, all of whom were married and had been well settled, and both his parents had died before his wife's death. If however the children had been born in a joint family they still would have had some elderly member in the family to back them up in the absence of their mother and in that case the family could have been held together. I strongly believe that moving out from home as an adolescent after her mother's early demise had been detrimental to Margarethe in every way, because it had started off a trail of unfortunate occurrences which she was neither prepared to face, nor was she capable to handle. All of a sudden, as if, Adam had thrown away his "little orchid" into the deep waters of hard reality. From the cozy nook of her sweet home she had abruptly been put into the agonizing realm of the odious world. She was therefore bound to get lost in the hazardous web of life.

Margarethe had seen her mother's dedication for the family and the children and had also witnessed her sufferings and eventual death caused by Adam's apathy after his bankruptcy. Like numerous other Dutch women

7 Howe, *op. cit.*, 18.

of her time Antje van der Meulen must have followed the “Marriage Bible” of Jacob Cats (*Houwelyck*), which was published in 1625, and had been extremely popular in the then Dutch society. It had preached the duties of women at all the six stages of their life (maiden, sweetheart, bride, housewife, mother, widow), stressing on their duties of domesticity and child rearing in marriage. Deeply shaken by her mother’s premature death Margarethe might have thought that adhering to the traditional model of womanhood was simply futile and was not really necessary for her. She had certainly not been born to suffer or to vegetate like a slave as her mother did. She knew she loved the adventures of life and all the enjoyment it offered. After all she had Adam’s blood in her veins, and since early childhood had been deeply impressed by his love for sophistication and grandeur. She must have thought why would only men have all the right to enjoy! As in all other western countries during the middle of the nineteenth century, in The Netherlands too, feminism had started to spread wings as women had traditionally been denied the right to higher education, right to equal opportunity and equal pay for work, right to property and possession, right to guardianship, and above all, their voting right. In 1878, Aletta Henriette Jacobs had been the first European lady from The Netherlands to have completed the medical degree. In order to fight for women’s rights, in 1888, women’s weekly magazine *The Women* was started by Wilhelmina Drucker (a.k.a. Gipsy), a First Wave feminist in Amsterdam, followed by the Free Women’s Association (VVV). Her Association had been the first organized league in The Netherlands to have raised women’s issues strongly and had voiced for the relief of women’s stupid, insensible, ridiculous, and unreasonable household duties. Was Margarethe aware of the revolutionary feminist currents of the late nineteenth century in The Netherlands, or as such in Europe? Did she ever get an opportunity to go through the Dutch translation (1870) of *The Subjection of Women* penned by John Stuart Mill, where he had aptly described woman as “the actual ‘bond-servant’ of her husband”?<sup>8</sup> If given a choice she might have rebelled for the novel idea of equal right to enjoyment, which none of the feminists of her time would have dared to. Margarethe had never cared for right to equal education, equal wage, and not even for the voting right. Feminism had never been her forte.

After Antje’s death, Adam had compelled his teenage daughter to leave the family for good, while she had longed to be with him in Amsterdam.

8 J. S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 55.

As an adolescent teenager to feel awfully insecure without her mother was quite normal for Margarethe, and separated from her brothers she was even abandoned by her father. She had been sent alone to her uncle's house, which had infuriated her as she felt terribly alienated, but she was helpless. She could only blame Adam for everything that had happened to them. At the age of only 13, she had realized that her life would become miserable in the company of her orthodox relatives, because her idea of happiness differed vastly from what they had planned for her. Margarethe had felt the need to take life in her own stride. However, I wonder whether she had ever pondered about the following what-if scenario—what would have happened if instead of the twins Adam had taken her along with him to Amsterdam. Under any circumstance his second wife would surely not support Margarethe's extravagant lifestyle, and after his bankruptcy Adam would in no way continue to pamper his darling daughter as he had always done before. In that case also she would have blamed Adam for all unhappiness that would befall her. The only thing Adam would then have done according to the social customs was to get her married to a groom of his choice. Would she be happy ever after in that case? Was she prepared to accept all domestic responsibilities customary for a wife in the male-dominated bourgeois society that she had been a part of? I suppose the answers to these questions would surely be in the negative, because she had hated the idea of being a domestic slave to the husband. She could have never lived in anonymity like the millions of European wives of her time. Margarethe was inclined to challenge masculine identity of the society from the very start, and therefore might not have been suited for the customary role of a wife and mother. Hence, the first phase of Margarethe's life was bound to end there, and so it did, although by then she had started to show one of the dangerous traits of her personality—strength and assertiveness—in a thoroughly bourgeois society where women had been liberated neither socially nor legally. Therefore, she was denied the social space that she had claimed for.

My efforts at a socio-cultural post-mortem of Margarethe's life and her tragic end necessitates digging into the socio-cultural past of the European society, especially of The Netherlands, France, and England, during the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, because that had been the center stage of her narrative. The *Napoleonic Civil Code* in France and in The Netherlands, and the Victorian sentiment in England, had cast overwhelming impact through the length and

breadth of the populace. Napoleon, the proud creator of the *Civil Code*, was exceptionally inspired by the laws of ancient Rome (Justinian Code) while compiling it, which had been implemented in France in 1805, and in The Netherlands in 1811. Although his *Code* had undergone certain modifications in The Netherlands in 1838, it had continued to influence the society for more than a 100 years. The *Civil Code* had manifested a double standard regarding the laws prescribed for man and woman, for example, in cases of adultery, property rights, rights over children, etc. In continuation of the traditional patriarchal ideals of that era the *Code* had confined women to the private sphere and had characterized them with the feminine qualities of beauty, charm, and seductiveness. Popular belief had been that women were never guided by reason and therefore lacked the essential aptitudes to participate in the public sphere. According to Napoleon, women were “chattels” of men, and hence, their obligations were complete dependence on and submission to their husbands and family.<sup>9</sup> In his opinion nothing could have been more important for a woman other than marrying and producing children, because she was in essence her husband’s personal property. Due to the husband’s marital power, he had the right to rule his wife and was considered to be the sovereign lord of his house. Woman was expected by the society and bound by law to be obedient to her husband all through her life. J. S. Mill wrote: “... no slave is a slave to the same lengths, and in so full a sense of the word, as a wife is.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, women had been considered to be the “second sex” who were undoubtedly stationed inferior to men by all means, and it was quite normal for men to have control over them—could be the father, brother, husband, or even the aged sons. Women who had not been under such control were looked down upon as fallen, were not respected because they posed a challenge to the gender-role defined by the society, and in most cases had become social outcasts.

The same had also been true in Victorian England. Victorian values had included strict set of moral standards reflected particularly through sexual restraint and rigid social control. The Queen believed that because God had created men and women separately, they should be different in all ways and continue to remain in their own positions—man being the master and woman the subject. Respectability had been an important social construct both for men and women. Marriage and motherhood

9 June K. Burton, *Napoleon and the Woman Question*, 6.

10 Mill, *op. cit.*, 57.

held the central position in the notion of ideal womanhood. Family bore all features of the bourgeois society, where women were expected to be sacrificing, caring, and devoted. Nothing was more respectable for a wife than bearing and rearing children. Bram Dijkstra explained this position of women as that of “household nuns.”<sup>11</sup> Woman was expected to be so passionless, pure, and spiritual that she almost would not have a body. The perfect “household nun” should support her husband spiritually, and protect him from all kinds of moral pitfalls; and this service could only be possible if she was morally perfect. Therefore, her place had to be inside home, which was considered to be unpolluted by sin. DeBerg wrote: “Men needed a refuge entirely free from the trials and uncertainties of the world of business and politics.”<sup>12</sup> And it had been the wife’s task to provide him the safe haven after every tiring day. Men compensated women by naming her “queen of the home,” thus making them joyous and content with the position. The French *Civil Code* of Napoleon surely had a deep influence on Queen Victoria. J. C. Herold suggested, “It was with him, not with Queen Victoria, that Victorian morality originated.”<sup>13</sup>

This particular value system of the then society had been extremely important in the trial and execution of Mata Hari. It has been evident from the various writings of her biographers that she was convicted not for what she had done, but certainly for what she had been. Rosie White wrote: “Her real story is a morality tale of a different kind, as it maps the changing roles of women in modern Europe. In this sense, she may be a feminist fore-runner ...”<sup>14</sup> White furthermore added: “Mata Hari fed into projections, fears and anxieties regarding women and modernity that emerged in the late nineteenth century.” The conservative people who had been powerful, especially the Catholics, somehow had despised her for what she was and had seen her life as that of a heretic—as deviation from the traditional female position in the society. A Protestant by belief, Mata Hari had never shown any sort of ardent religious behavior. Her character traits could never have come anywhere closer to that of a “household nun.” Therefore, she could obviously be targeted for her lifestyle by those who believed that being a woman she should have been confined to the private realm of domestic life; instead, she had shunned

11 Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 3.

12 DeBerg, *op. cit.*, 20.

13 J. C. Herold, *The Age of Napoleon*, 149.

14 Rosie White, *Violent Femmes: Women as Spies in Popular Culture*, 34.

her family to enjoy life in horribly unacceptable ways displaying depraved morality. For them she had definitely been setting a bad precedence in the society as she became an icon of carnality in her time. She in fact had been too visible in a male-dominated society, which did not even permit any legal status to women living apart from men. She had always been more active than was socially assigned to respectable women of the then society. Rosie White was of the opinion that, "This active role marks her out as not 'proper,' not 'feminine'; in her wifely behavior as in her subsequent career, she exceeded the bounds of her gender, class, and race."<sup>15</sup>

During the turn of the century, Europe had been witnessing many changes. The first wave of feminism had already flourished by that time and women became more vocal regarding their social and legal rights. Women suffrage movements had been uprising as they had claimed to establish their own identity and dignity. It had given birth to the notion of "New Woman" (coined in England and used by Sarah Grand in her essay "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," published in *North American Review*, Vol. 158, No. 448, March 1894, 271), who had rebelled against man's control over her and had wanted to live life on her own terms defying all illogical orthodox norms of domesticity. The New Woman had aspired to step beyond the limit of motherhood and to create a new identity in the public sphere by taking up jobs that had traditionally been meant for men. She had vouched for equal opportunity of the sexes and had claimed respect not as man's slave or helpmate, but as a human being. She had realized the value of economic independence, as it entailed all kinds of freedom. Only because woman had no other way than to depend on man for her living that man took advantage of her situation to enslave and ridicule her. New Woman had vowed to stop exploitation by the dominating sex, who had traditionally considered themselves to be superior in every way, as they had the control over productive paid service. Men, through ages, had considered women to be particularly suitable only for unpaid domestic work and therefore they were assigned merely with reproduction. For them the ideal woman had to be domestic goddess who would take care of his every mundane need. But in order to become self-sustaining in all possible ways, New Woman was keen to exchange unpaid work for paid work. Productive work had been her chief goal, and she had wanted to shed the burden of reproduction, which only enchained and disadvantaged her. The image of a

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 36.

end of sample