

THE PREDATORY VIEW OF MEN OVER THE IDEALISTIC PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN: A STUDY ON *THE COLLECTOR*, BY JOHN FOWLES

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersections of gendered power dynamics, idealization and subjugation by analyzing John Fowles's 1963 novel *The collector* against the backdrop of contemporary traditionalist movements, such as the *tradwife* phenomenon. Operating at the crux of literary analysis and feminist critique, the study examines how the male predatory gaze conceptualizes women not as human equals, but as aesthetic, submissive objects of collection and control. Drawing upon the linguistic frameworks of *zoosemy* and *zoometaphor* (Rayevska, 1979; Skalauskaite, 2010), as well as ecofeminist theories linking the domination of women to the exploitation of nature (Gruen, 1994; Salmen & Dhont, 2020), the study dissects the narrative of the antagonist, Frederick Clegg. It argues that Clegg's entomological reduction of the protagonist, Miranda Grey, into a "specimen" reflects broader societal structures that demand female purity and dependency. Crucially, the investigation goes into the violent rupture that occurs when the idealized fantasy is broken by the victim's assertions of human autonomy and sexual agency, shifting her status from an exalted prize to a disposable entity. Ultimately, the discussion demonstrates how historical and modern iterations of regressive traditionalism weaponize idealization to strip women of their humanity, positioning female self-determination as a vital disruption to systemic patriarchal domination.

Keywords: John Fowles; *The Collector*; Feminist Literary Criticism, Zoometaphor; Patriarchal Control.

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Introduction

Que fors aus ne le sot riens nee. Besides them, no one else knew. Originally from the *Châtelaine de Vergy*, an anonymously written 13th century romance of courtly love in Old French about the tragic secret romance between the mistress of the castle (the chatelaine) and a young knight. That is the phrase written before the beginning of *The collector*, by John Fowles, first published in 1963. Unlike its romantic origins, for our object of study, the phrase means something darker in many levels; besides them, no one else knew Miranda was Clegg's prisoner in his hope to convince her to love him – or, as we argue, to control a piece of his collection.

In Fowles's work, we follow a three-part narrative about Frederick Clegg masterplan after winning the lottery: kidnapping Miranda Grey, his beloved *pale clouded yellow* (Fowles, 1963, p. 1). Hoping that the only reason why she could not see how perfect they were for each other was their different surroundings – now no longer an issue since he had money, and as narrated by Clegg himself: "I had the money. I had the will." (Fowles, 1963, p. 8) – Clegg, a butterfly collector, observed Miranda and took her into a place he built with everything he knew she liked, since that was the only way for her to notice him. Throughout this paper, we will delve deeper into the narrative of Clegg, however, it is important to mention that all the "love" he felt was from a perspective of idealization of Miranda. For he did not know her, he only knew what he wanted her to be: a rare, beautiful piece in his collection. That piece was broken as soon as proven different from his expectations. How different is that from the male predatory view of men over women out of fiction? That is what we will study and discuss.

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With the growing movement of *tradwives*, we often catch ourselves aware of pieces from *The collector* and Frederick's expectations of his *guest* – or, as we prefer to call her, victim. In this paper, we will talk about how men see women as prey, not for survival, but for control and desires, and how that view is broken when women simply act out of their expectations – or idealization. Using *The collector* as our literary piece of study, we will investigate how the constant mention of women as animals is threatening, taking into consideration how they are always small and helpless – like Clegg's insects – while men are big and strong. The female sex is seen as in need of protection, that is why we need a man in our lives, and *don't we dare to prove them otherwise!* With that in mind, we will also assert how even the sexualization of women is not the issue, since they do not need a sexual piece, but a submissive pure one. We will also talk about how the perspective of sexual freedom is a villain, since a person who allows themselves to be free or active in any way stops being in such need of protection, and is stained by society sins.

Drawing on literary examples and existing academic and critical scholarship, this study seeks to understand the dangers inherent in the retrograde traditionalist narrative that metaphorically casts women as prey – or idealizes them as such. Furthermore, it addresses the risks such philosophies face when this fantasy is shattered by the victim herself, as she transforms into her own protector.

Women as animals: Fiction and real life

Both in fiction and in daily life, it is quite common to make comparisons of people with nature; however, it is very different to say someone is as fast as a rabbit to describing a sex worker as “a specimen you'd turn away from, out collecting.” (Fowles, 1963, p. 15), which is how Frederick Clegg describes the worker he himself called for *we-know-what*. That is already a clear example of how we see men describing women generally: harmful. They have the freedom of desire, of power, but the woman used for it is less than they are, she is a simple disposable object, like the carcass of an animal after the predator finished the meal.

In a 2024 study, Liudmyla Hryzhak explores the animal metaphors of women in Victorian prose fiction, and often mentions how Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* compares its heroine with a caged bird during various moments of her life. With that in mind, Hryzhak writes about the importance of contextual factors to distribute meaning to metaphors, and uses the following sentences as examples:

- (1) “I COULD WALK THE MATTED FLOOR AS SOFTLY AS A CAT.” (Brontë, 2003, p. 241);
- (2) “YOU HAG, YOU CAT, YOU DOG, YOU BRIMSTONE BARKER!” (Dickens, 1985, p. 522).

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With those examples in mind, Hryzhak then explains:

The animal metaphor cat in the first sentence carries a positive connotation, enhanced by the adverb softly, characterizing gentle Jane Eyre's walk. Conversely, the same metaphor in the second sentence has a negative connotation due to its use with nouns having negative meanings, such as hag, dog, barker, and the derogatory adjective brimstone. (2024, p. 38)

In our study, that is very clear by Clegg's description of Miranda as a beautiful pale clouded yellow, and the sex worker as a mere specimen not even worth catching. Still with *Jane Eyre's* metaphor as a caged bird, it is relevant to keep in mind the importance of context in its narration as well: just like Jane, a caged bird still has hope and possibility of freedom. But, in Clegg's horizon, no butterfly remains part of a living collection nor does any escape its glass cage. Further in this paper, we will discuss Miranda's doom, but let us stick with the danger of animal depictions of women for now.

At the methodological level, it is necessary to distinguish two fundamental theoretical categories that guide the transposition of animal attributes to the human domain: *zoosemy*, developed by Rayevska (1979, p. 159), and *zoometaphor*, by Skalauskaite (2010). The first refers to the use of metaphors with animal names to *denote human qualities* – as written by Rayevska herself – and the latter is about a specific metaphor *in which the behavior, emotion or appearance of an animal is a reference to the behavior, emotion or appearance of the human* (Skalauskaite, 2010, p. 17). In our studies, both of them can be used, since it is common to mix the comparison of people and animals for both behaviors and appearances.

In another study conducted by Alina Salmen and Kristof Dhont (2020), the authors observe that, while comparing women to cute animals, flowers and elements of nature in general might seem harmless or even complimentary, such a practice can entail negative consequences. As described by Plumwood (1993), nature is viewed as something pure requiring preservation; this is the central logic underlying both the ideal of womanhood and Clegg's fantasy regarding Miranda. This discursive alignment reveals the mechanism of animalistic dehumanization: by reducing the woman to the status of a natural element, the oppressor legitimizes his hostility and neutralizes guilt over his domination, effectively transforming violent control into a purported act of ecological or domestic care. In other words, if a woman is viewed as either a butterfly or a pet in need of guardianship, the man need not see himself as a monster or a kidnapper; instead, he sees himself as a *caretaker*. Hostility erupts only when this "prey" reminds the predator of her humanity by demanding agency and autonomy, thereby shattering the fantasy of perfect control. "Women's link with nature might be particularly associated with hostile attitudes if they are likened to animals

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and denied full humanness.” (Salmen & Dhont, 2020, p. 8). In Fowles’s narrative, we see precisely this: Miranda did indeed represent a pure manifestation of nature in Clegg’s eyes – this up to the point in which she shattered the image he held of her; it was only when he felt revulsion that he saw her as human for the first time.

Within the paradigm of the female-prey and male-predator dichotomy, Lori Gruen (1994) compares men not only as a same-level type of predator on equal footing with nature, but to something even more dangerous: a hunter. This distinction shifts the dynamic from an act of survival to a systemic, deliberate pursuit driven by sport, trophy-gathering and the total subjugation of the target.

One of the more popular origin stories suggests that an evolutionary shift occurred as a result of the emergence of hunting behavior in male horninids? According to this theory, the hunter’s destructive, competitive, and violent activity directed toward his prey is what originally distinguished man from animal and thus culture from nature. (...) In this account of human social evolution, woman’s body (being smaller, weaker, and reproductive) prevents her from participating in the hunt, and thus relegates her to the arena of non-culture. (Gruen, 1994, p. 62)

When the woman is viewed as a creature who needs someone superior for survival, she is not only prey, but useless, only there to be grateful for the stronger creature. In *The collector*, Clegg describes himself as not having a sex drive as the rest of the men he saw, and says: “It’s some crude animal thing I was born without. (And I’m glad I was, if more people were like me, in my opinion, the world would be better.)” (Fowles, 1963, p. 3). With the same line of thought, he later says, after taking pictures of Miranda while she was passed out: “About what I did, undressing her, when I thought after, I saw it wasn’t so bad; not many would have kept control of themselves, just taking photos, it was almost a point in my favour.” (Fowles, 1963, p. 87). For Clegg, and most traditional ideas, the woman should be grateful for any minimum action from the man who provides, either the reason why she is in need is a real choice or prison. Frederick describes himself as kind for not doing anything else, because most men would, and does not see a problem in sexualizing and assaulting Miranda since she was unconscious, therefore still pure.

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The idealization of women: Miranda's demise in *The collector*

In *The collector*, from the beginning, we see how Frederick Clegg's fixation relies entirely on a solipsistic fantasy rather than any genuine knowledge of Miranda. They had never communicated and, even during her time captive when they would talk, Clegg would often be frustrated if she acted in a way he did not accept her to be like. For example, when she tried to convince him to let her go the first time, going against his illusion that she would simply go along with the plan and they would be perfect for each other, prompting him to confess: "I couldn't say what I felt, I just had to leave her; she was really hurting me." (Fowles, 1963, p. 36). Clegg's desire is predicated on a static, aestheticized docility, as evidenced by his reaction to seeing her in the garments he purchased: "I thought of her sitting on my knees, very still, with me stroking her soft blonde hair, all out loose as I saw it after." (Fowles, 1963, p. 34). That is what we read after Clegg sees Miranda with the clothes he bought for her. In a study of the book, Barry N. Olshen (1985, p. 31) notes this voyeuristic gaze functions identically to his entomological practice, reducing Miranda's "free and vital nature in his mind's eye to the status of an object, a 'specimen' in a collection". There is no love between Clegg and Miranda, only obsession and idealization. He wanted what many men do: his perfect, pure woman.

When Frederick describes his plan, it is often mentioned how it simply happened for him to have money, buy a van, stalk Miranda and prepare a house to keep her captive –as often does, right? Obviously not. This form of narrative tells us about the narrator's perspective from the start, because for him, he was never wrong, it was the world who played against him and made him do everything he did. Allow us to elaborate.

The only thing Clegg ever loved growing up was collecting butterflies, which was taught by his Uncle Dick. He was also raised by his Aunt Annie and Cousin Mabel, but they despised his butterflies. At some point, his uncle has a stroke, and is never the same after, no talking or moving. Clegg felt alone again, all he had was his insects, and in the end, that is how he saw Miranda: a piece for his collection, an experiment to see how far he could hunt. We see his contempt for the female being in a very simple description of Mabel, who had a physical condition that required a wheelchair: "I think people like Mabel should be put out painlessly." (Fowles, 1963, p. 13), a thought that never even crosses his mind about his Uncle Dick. Clegg felt like a victim because he was not good looking enough, or outgoing, or because Miranda simply did not give in to his plan to make her understand how much they could work by keeping her captive. For him, all he was doing was getting what was rightfully his, even if it cost lives that were never his to take or control.

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This logic of domination extends to the methodological violence analyzed by Gruen, particularly regarding animal experimentation, where she notes the following: “A majority of the experiments are conducted to satisfy curiosity rather than to improve anyone’s health.” (1994, p. 65). Unfortunately, that applies to both animals and humans under the hands of supremacy. In *The collector*, we see how Miranda was a disposable test after Clegg did not see her as his ideal love any longer, and at the end of the novel, he mentions the idea of getting a next victim, but doing things differently this time, showing who the boss is. In a world where men are allowed to control things as they wish for their own desire, any creature seen as inferior finds itself in a place of risk. As Ynestra King so brutally suggests: “Life on earth is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy. There is no natural hierarchy; human hierarchy is projected on to nature and then used to justify social domination.” (1983, pp. 119-120). So, when we position King’s axiom as a conceptual anchor of this analysis, we take it from there that the narrative trajectory of *The collector* ceases to be an insular study of individual male pathology to get unveiled as a microcosm of patriarchal hegemony, a matrix of domination that is absolute, transforming both the natural world and the female body into battlegrounds for unchecked sovereign desire.

When creating the story for *The collector*, Fowles admitted that one of his inspirations was a real-life crime from 1957, entitled “Not prisoner of love” by the *Leader-Post Journal*, as seen on the picture bellow:

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Not prisoner of love

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Brunette captive of eccentric inventor did hard labor for 105 days

LONDON (AP) — A 23-year-old brunette claims an eccentric inventor held her captive for 105 days in a dugout beneath the back garden of his suburban home.

Police removed Marjorie Jordan from the underground den Monday after a neighbor found a note asking for help.

The alleged captor, John Bridal, 26, told reporters:

"She was not brought here under force, but she needed some persuading. She was not enthusiastic but agreed to help me with my experiments. I did not keep her against her will, except for the first few days."

In a statement to detectives, however, Miss Jordan declared that Bridal, a complete stranger, had kidnapped her from her bedroom in a lodging house two miles from his home the night of Jan. 7.

DOWN PIPE SHAFT

She said he taped her mouth, put her on the rear seat of his motorcycle and took her to the underground room. Reached by a shaft made from a large pipe, the room was 10 feet long, four feet wide and seven feet high. The shaft exit was secured by a screw-down cover of the manhole type.

"He said, 'I need an assistant for some experiments I am going to make on metal work and machinery,'" Miss Jordan reported.

"He would come to the room each night and let me come up to his house. He would stand guard outside the bathroom door while I washed. Then he would lead me back to the room."

"He got an electric stove and fixed up current in the hole and then, every day, he would lower down food which he bought from shopping lists I made out for him."

"About three weeks ago he decided that I was resigned to my fate, and he let down a wireless set."

"I had my handbag compact, luckily, so I was able to do my face each day and keep my self-respect a bit. But, golly, how I longed to go to the hairdresser or else have a darned good bath."

"I think I threw out six 'help' messages in all. I dropped them as we walked in the dark for my wash and I threw the last one over the fence into the next garden."

In his statement Bridal said he was "perfecting a grinding machine and a coal conveyor."

"She was my assistant, doing laboring work while I did Designing and the lathe work."

Miss Jordan said that most of her time was spent helping Bridal make the dugout bigger.

"I shovelled out earth and put it into buckets which he pulled up. Sometimes we loaded as many as 60 buckets a day."

Bridal insisted that he met Miss Jordan early in January while she was working as a shop attendant and "she said she would like to work for me."

"Her room in the cellar was a very good room," he told reporters. "She had every comfort. I even went to the library for novels for her."



MAYFLOWER STOWAWAY: An unsuccessful stowaway, Bob Lewis, 27, points out the Mayflower II, outward bound from Plymouth, England, to re-create the voyage of the original Pilgrim ship. Discovered about 10 miles out to sea, Lewis was put over the side with newsmen into a fishing boat.

(The Leader-Post, Regina, Saskatchewan, 1957. p. 21)

The man who committed the crime claimed he was very busy and needed a woman as an "assistant" while he did work out of the house. In a way, John Bridal and Frederick Clegg committed a crime with very similar goals: to control a woman based on expectations over her sex. Bridal wanted a homemaker to serve him, and Clegg wanted a stranger he thought he knew to serve him love and beauty. Miranda's fate was not about the traditional wife, but it was surrounded by manipulation, assault and idealization of her femininity.

Later in Fowles's narrative, Clegg decides to buy a ring and proposes to Miranda, adding to this the claim how he *doesn't want much*, to which she painfully replies:

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I know you don't. Only the things that I have to give anyway. The way I look and speak and move. But I'm other things. I have other things to give. And I can't give them to you, because I don't love you. (Fowles, 1963, p. 74)

We witnessed one of Miranda's most impactful and painful lines in the work, as she tries to make him understand the utter impossibility of a real relationship between them – simply because she was imprisoned, as if there were no other possible horizons for her existence. It sounds rather odd for such honesty in a state of captivity; however, Miranda was in a way hopeful to help Clegg to understand how he was living in illusion, and it was pointless until she destroyed the way he saw her in a desperate measure.

After failing once again in her attempt to escape, Miranda decides to offer what she believes to be Clegg's desire – since it is what most men seek when trying to control a woman: sex. It is a desperate seduction attempt orchestrated to negotiate her freedom, an effort to strip the sacredness from Clegg's platonic obsession by offering her body in exchange for escape. The problem was that, despite fantasizing about it, Frederick could not tolerate Miranda's freedom to act in such a way. Upon seeing her step out of his dreams and into reality, and realizing his own inability to consummate the act, the roles reversed: he ceased to be the predator holding control over her body, and Miranda became merely another woman unworthy of his respect. Clegg then makes the following statement to Miranda, in a moment that ignites his anger:

You must realize that I've sacrificed all my principles tonight. Oh, yes, to escape. I was thinking of that. [...] To show you that sex – sex is just an activity, like nothing else. [...] I'm doing something for you I've never done for any man. And – well, I think you owe me something. (Fowles, 1963, p. 102)

Not only was he not satisfied with her knowledge of sex, Clegg also saw it as her way of using all the female stain for her own good, thinking: "I saw her game, of course. [...] Making you feel like you really did owe her something, just like she never started it all in the first place." (Fowles, 1963, p. 103). Through this cognitive inversion, Clegg repositions himself as the true casualty of the encounter. Within his solipsistic logic, the living and "blemished" butterfly – by refusing to remain an inanimate, pristine specimen – incurs the ultimate guilt simply by existing outside his absolute control and attracting unsolicited interest. In other words, he once again casts himself as the victim of a woman who was beyond his control – of a butterfly that remained alive and degraded – and the fault was hers simply for having captured his attention.

Unfortunately, Miranda does not survive for long after this. She gets sick, and even though Frederick claims he never planned for it to happen, the sickness kills her because he

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thought she was always lying. After Miranda was no longer what he wished, she became disposable, and Clegg believes he was right to let her die after finding notes she wrote while captive, which judged him for his criminal actions. How absurd! He definitely thought so.

Finally, John Fowles's construction of Miranda's persona draws intertextual inspiration from Shakespeare's *The tempest*, whose character with the same name is stranded on an island, in companionship of the monstrous Caliban. Shakespeare's Miranda also struggles with how her hope for mankind bruises her. Unlike the play, Fowles intentionally ruptures this romantic lineage: stripped of the redemptive machinery of Shakespearean magic, his protagonist is subjected to a stark, naturalistic reality. Miranda's tragic demise is not a consequence of metaphysical fate or nominal destiny but, rather, a direct product of her gender, as a sentence triggered by the simple act of existing within an androcentric trap.

Final considerations

In a way, just like the first cases of stalking behavior were diagnosed as *delusional lovesickness*, and crimes committed by romantic partners in the heat of the action are sometimes still called *crime of passion*, the act of kidnapping Miranda was seen as love through Clegg's eyes. His love faded as soon as his ideal woman disappeared. In a world of technology, the wave of *tradwives* is a danger to young people, since it shows a person who serves that is supposed to be love. The freedom of an individual should make them comfortable in their own decision-making process, instead of being influenced to be an idealized submissive shell of themselves in order to hope to find love.

In a study named "John Fowles's variations in *The Collector*", Perry Nodelman quite dangerously states: "Miranda's obsession with G. P. strangely parallels Clegg's obsession with her." (1987, p. 338). The danger comes in comparing the obsession of a man who wanted a prey under his power with the mention of a victim looking for comfort in writing to a man from outside of her cage – a man Miranda is clearly not even that interested in. The comparison is the same as blaming a woman for following and turning into the male idealization of her gender, when that is all she learned could be done in order to be loved.

Miranda Grey, just like many women out of basements, was a victim of a male idealization over her femininity. She was destroyed by the hunger for power over what should have equality, and the moment she made him see her as human, she was nothing but a normal, dirty, disposable woman. Just as a man is allowed to fantasize about a woman in a mini-skirt, but judges her when she wears one by her own freedom of choice. Female rights are a threat to the idealistic portrayal of women because they allow women to act as they will, turning the prey into predator, or even worse for those who wish to hunt them, into humans.

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A VISÃO PREDATÓRIA DOS HOMENS SOBRE A REPRESENTAÇÃO IDEALISTA DAS MULHERES: UM ESTUDO SOBRE *O COLECIONADOR*, DE JOHN FOWLES

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RESUMO

Este artigo explora as interseções entre dinâmicas de poder de gênero, idealização e subjugação, analisando o romance de John Fowles, de 1963, *O colecionador*, tendo como pano de fundo movimentos tradicionalistas contemporâneos, como o fenômeno das “esposas tradicionais” (*tradwives*). Operando na intersecção entre análise literária e crítica feminista, o estudo examina como o olhar predatório masculino concebe as mulheres não como iguais humanas, mas como objetos estéticos e submissos de coleção e controle. Baseando-se nos referenciais linguísticos da *zoossemia* e *zoometáfora* (Rayevska, 1979; Skalauskaite, 2010), bem como em teorias ecofeministas que vinculam a dominação das mulheres à exploração da natureza (Gruen, 1994; Salmen & Dhont, 2020), este artigo dissecar a narrativa do antagonista, Frederick Clegg. Argumenta-se que a redução entomológica da protagonista, Miranda Grey, a um *espécime* por Clegg reflete estruturas sociais mais amplas que exigem pureza e dependência feminina. Fundamentalmente, a investigação é conduzida para a ruptura violenta que ocorre quando a fantasia idealizada é quebrada pelas afirmações da vítima sobre sua autonomia humana e agência sexual, alterando seu status de um prêmio exaltado para uma entidade descartável. Em última análise, este estudo demonstra como as iterações históricas e modernas do tradicionalismo regressivo instrumentalizam a idealização para desumanizar as mulheres, posicionando a autodeterminação feminina como uma ruptura vital com a dominação patriarcal sistêmica.

Palavras-chave: John Fowles; O colecionador; Crítica Literária Feminista; Zoometáfora; Controle Patriarcal.

DOSSIÊ “GÓTICO: IMAGINÁRIO SOCIOPOLÍTICO E A ESTÉTICA DO MEDO”

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LA VISIÓN DEPRADADORA DEL HOMBRE FRENTE A LA REPRESENTACIÓN IDEALISTA DE LA MUJER: UN ESTUDIO SOBRE *EL COLECCIONISTA*, POR JOHN FOWLES

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RESUMEN

Este artículo explora las intersecciones entre las dinámicas de poder de género, la idealización y la subyugación, analizando la novela de John Fowles de 1963, *El coleccionista*, en el contexto de los movimientos tradicionalistas contemporáneos, como el fenómeno de las *tradwives*. Operando en la intersección del análisis literario y la crítica feminista, el estudio examina cómo la mirada masculina depredadora concibe a las mujeres no como iguales humanas, sino como objetos estéticos y sumisos de colección y control. Basándose en las referencias lingüísticas de zoosemia y zoometafora (Rayevska, 1979; Skalauskaite, 2010), así como en las teorías ecofeministas que vinculan la dominación de las mujeres con la explotación de la naturaleza (Gruen, 1994; Salmen y Dhont, 2020), este artículo disecciona la narrativa del antagonista, Frederick Clegg. Se argumenta que la reducción entomológica que Clegg hace de la protagonista, Miranda Grey, a un espécimen refleja estructuras sociales más amplias que exigen pureza y dependencia femenina. Fundamentalmente, la investigación se basa en la ruptura violenta que se produce cuando la fantasía idealizada se desmorona ante las afirmaciones de la víctima sobre su autonomía humana y su capacidad de decisión sexual, transformando su estatus de un premio exaltado en una entidad desechable. En última instancia, este estudio demuestra cómo las manifestaciones históricas y modernas del tradicionalismo regresivo instrumentalizan la idealización para deshumanizar a las mujeres, posicionando la autodeterminación femenina como una ruptura vital con la dominación patriarcal sistémica.

Palabras-clave: John Fowles; *El coleccionista*; Crítica literaria feminista; Zoometáfora; Control patriarcal.

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