Studies in English Language Teaching
ISSN 2372-9740 (Print) ISSN 2329-311X (Online)
Vol. 13, No. 3, 2025
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/selt

Original Paper

The Fragmentation and Alienation of Ethics: A Study on the Ethical Choices in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Xiaoxuan Feng[1] & Tingting Jia[2]

[1,2] Zhiyuan School of Liberal Arts, Beijing Institute of Petro-chemical Technology, Beijing, China

Received: August 8, 2025 Accepted: September 4, 2025 Online Published: September 8, 2025

doi:10.22158/selt.v13n3p81 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/selt.v13n3p81

Abstract

Wide Sargasso Sea, a novel written by the British female writer Jean Rhys, is known as the prequel to Jane Eyre. Since its publication, the novel has been analyzed and studied by a number of scholars from various perspectives of ecologism, postcolonialism, and feminism, etc. Employing Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism, this study explores the ethical choices in the novel, analyzing how colonialism and patriarchy cause ethical fragmentation and alienation. Focusing on ethical environment, identity, predicament, and choice, it examines how systemic oppression distorts moral reasoning and limits individual agency. As a marginalized Creole woman Antoinette faces fractured ethical identities due to racial exclusion and familial estrangement in a colonial-patriarchal environment. Her choices from compliance to defiance reflect a tragic fight against dehumanization, ending in self-loss symbolized by being renamed "Bertha" and her final arson. Rochester, embodying colonial-patriarchal hegemony, treats relationships as power transactions; his choices of exploiting Antoinette's dowry, erasing her identity, and fabricating "madness" expose colonial ethics' hypocrisy. And the secondary characters such as Christophine and Daniel further illustrate colonial ethical corruption. The study reveals colonialism and patriarchy alienate both colonized and colonizer, offering insights into postcolonial critiques of systemic injustice.

Keywords

Ethical literary criticism, Antoinette, Rochester, ethical choices, ethical fragmentation, alienation, colonialism, patriarchy

1. Introduction

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)—a celebrated postcolonial reimagining of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*—centers on Antoinette Cosway, a Creole woman of European descent raised in the Caribbean. Her tragic trajectory, from the daughter of a plantation owner to the "madwoman in the attic," is recast

as a nuanced exploration of identity, power, and oppression. Set against the backdrop of post-emancipation Caribbean society, the novel lays bare the intertwined violences of colonialism, racial hierarchy, and patriarchal control, offering a profound critique of how systemic structures shape individual fates.

This study adopts Nie Zhenzhao's theory of ethical literary criticism to examine the ethical choices of Antoinette, Rochester, and secondary characters including Christophine and Daniel. It investigates how their decisions are constrained and reshaped by the novel's fraught ethical environments, and how these choices ultimately determine the course of their lives.

Pioneered by Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao in the early 21st century, ethical literary criticism provides a framework for analyzing literary works through the lens of ethical dynamics. At its core lies the notion that literature engages with universal ethical questions by depicting characters' "ethical choices"—decisions shaped by the interplay of three key elements: "ethical environment" (socio-historical contexts), "ethical identity" (social roles and moral obligations), and "ethical predicaments" (conflicts arising from competing moral demands). Nie argues that such choices reveal the tension between humanistic ethics (rational will) and primal instincts (natural will), offering insights into both individual character and broader societal values. For *Wide Sargasso Sea*, this framework illuminates how colonial and patriarchal structures distort moral reasoning, compelling characters to navigate impossible ethical dilemmas.

The significance of this study lies in its focus on an underexplored dimension of *Wide Sargasso Sea* criticism. Existing scholarship has predominantly examined the novel through postcolonial, feminist, and intertextual lenses, while analyses rooted in ethical literary criticism remain limited. Domestically, Xie Xuemei (2017) and Xu Xiaowei (2022) have explored ecological and gendered themes; Zhang Feng (2009) and Xiao Jinlong (2014) have analyzed postcolonial resistance and identity reconstruction. Internationally, scholars such as Rashid (2021) and Darakhshan (2018) have focused on identity crisis and feminist concerns, with Halloran (2006) examining aesthetic resistance to colonialism. Ai Qinghua's (2011, 2013) work on Rochester's tragic ethics stands as a rare exception—but her analysis fails to fully address the "reciprocal" nature of ethical choices between characters or their mutual impact on one another's fates.

Research on ethical choices more broadly has advanced significantly through Nie Zhenzhao's work (2011, 2014, 2022). He links such choices to the "Sphinx Factor"—the tension between human and animal instincts—and draws on disaster-related ethical narratives such as *Oedipus the King* and *Titanic* to propose that individuals face tests of ethical choice in the midst of crisis. Scholars like Feng Tao (2024) have integrated psychological theories to enrich ethical analysis; Zheng Yongwang and Zhang Yuqi (2024), along with Li Zhiyao (2024), have applied Nie's framework to *Crime and Punishment* and *Wool*, respectively. Yet the ethical dynamics of *Wide Sargasso Sea*—particularly how colonial and patriarchal environments shape reciprocal choices between characters—remain underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by investigating how Antoinette's and Rochester's ethical choices are constrained by their fractured identities, oppressive environments, and the influence of secondary

characters like Christophine and Daniel. It seeks to unpack the complexity of ethical decision-making in a society defined by racial and gender hierarchies, offering new insights into how systemic power structures determine individual fates. By centering ethical choices as a lens to interpret *Wide Sargasso Sea*, this study aims to deepen our appreciation of the novel's critique of colonialism and patriarchy, while demonstrating the utility of ethical literary criticism in unpacking the complex interplay between individual agency and systemic oppression.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 An Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism

Pioneered by Professor Nie Zhenzhao in the early 21st century, ethical literary criticism emerges as a distinct methodological and intellectual approach to literary analysis. It centers on examining the intricate intersections of ethics, literature, and human experience. At its core, this theory posits that literary works are not merely aesthetic constructs but profound engagements with ethical questions—questions of moral value, human responsibility, and the dynamics of right and wrong, all shaped by historical and social contexts (Nie, 2014).

Nie (2011, 2014) articulates that ethical literary criticism investigates how literary texts reflect, challenge, or reinforce the ethical norms of their time, as well as how authors' own ethical orientations inform their creative process. It seeks to uncover the historical origins, social conditions, and psychological underpinnings of the ethical ideas embedded in literature—avoiding abstract or subjective moral judgments in favor of contextualized, objective analysis (Nie, 2014, p. 256). By focusing on ethical choices—the decisions characters make within the constraints of their circumstances—this framework illuminates not only individual character development but also broader societal attitudes toward morality, power, and justice.

For the study of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, ethical literary criticism offers a particularly incisive tool. The novel's exploration of colonialism, racial hierarchy, and patriarchal oppression is inherently ethical: it confronts readers with questions of responsibility, complicity, and resistance in a world where moral norms are distorted by systemic injustice. By applying Nie's framework, we can dissect how Antoinette, Rochester, and other characters navigate these fractured ethical landscapes, and how their choices reveal the tension between individual agency and structural constraint.

2.2 Key Concepts

2.2.1 Ethical Environment

The ethical environment refers to the historical, social, and cultural context in which literary characters exist—a dynamic matrix of norms, power structures, and values that shape their understanding of right and wrong. Unlike a merely physical or social setting, the ethical environment encompasses the unspoken rules, ideological assumptions, and institutionalized hierarchies that govern moral behavior. For instance, in colonial societies, racial segregation and imperialist ideology may normalize exploitation as "natural," creating an ethical environment where equality is devalued and domination is legitimized.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the Caribbean plantation society—marked by the legacy of slavery, racial stratification, and British colonial rule—constitutes a profoundly fractured ethical environment. It is a space where Creole identities are marginalized, women are reduced to property, and trust is eroded by suspicion between colonizers and colonized. Analyzing this environment is critical, as it provides the backdrop against which all characters' ethical choices unfold.

2.2.2 Ethical Identity

Nie (2014) defines ethical identity as the set of social roles, obligations, and moral commitments that define a person's place within an ethical community. These identities—such as "daughter," "colonizer," "wife," or "servant"—are not static; they are shaped by the ethical environment and carry with them specific responsibilities. A character may embody multiple, even conflicting, ethical identities, leading to confusion or conflict when their obligations to one role clash with those of another.

Antoinette's ethical identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is profoundly unstable: as a Creole woman, she is neither fully accepted by white colonizers nor by Black communities; as a wife in a patriarchal society, she is expected to submit to her husband's authority, yet she retains a sense of her own autonomy. Similarly, Rochester's identity as a British colonizer and a younger son, who is deprived of inheritance, compels him to prioritize power and wealth, even at the cost of moral integrity. These conflicting identities generate the ethical predicaments at the heart of the novel.

2.2.3 Ethical Predicament and Ethical Dilemma

An ethical predicament arises when characters face intractable conflicts rooted in confused ethical identities or disrupted ethical orders (Nie, 2014). It is a state of moral uncertainty, where the rules that once guided behavior no longer apply, leaving individuals adrift. For example, Antoinette's marginalized status in both racial and gender hierarchies leaves her without a stable ethical framework to navigate her relationships or her place in society.

An ethical dilemma is a specific type of predicament, characterized by a forced choice between two morally legitimate options—where selecting one necessarily violates the other (Nie, 2014, p. 262). Such dilemmas expose the limitations of moral absolutes, highlighting the complexity of ethical decision-making. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Christophine faces a subtle dilemma: her loyalty to Antoinette as her nurse conflicts with her skepticism about using obeah to manipulate Rochester, forcing her to choose between protecting Antoinette and upholding her own moral code.

2.2.4 Ethical Selection and Ethical Choices

Nie's theory distinguishes between three stages of human development: natural selection (the biological evolution that separates humans from other species), ethical selection (the process of cultivating moral consciousness), and scientific selection (the advancement of human civilization through knowledge). Ethical selection—the critical middle stage—represents an internal process that distinguishes humans from beasts.

Ethical choices—the concrete decisions characters make when confronting ethical predicaments—are the linchpin of this framework. These choices are shaped by the interplay of "human factors" (ethical

consciousness, rational will) and "animal factors" (primitive instincts, natural will), mediated by "free will" (Nie, 2022). In literature, characters' ethical choices reveal their moral character, drive plot development, and reflect the ethical values of their society.

For instance, Rochester's decision to marry Antoinette for her dowry, or to rename her "Bertha" to erase her Creole identity, reflects a prioritization of animal factors (greed, control) over human factors (empathy, respect). Conversely, Antoinette's final act of setting fire to Thornfield Hall—while destructive—can be read as a desperate assertion of rational will: a choice to reclaim agency in a world that denies her ethical subjecthood.

In sum, these concepts—ethical environment, identity, predicament, and choice—provide a cohesive framework for analyzing how *Wide Sargasso Sea* exposes the moral costs of colonialism and patriarchy. By tracing how characters navigate these ethical landscapes, we can uncover the novel's profound critique of systemic injustice and its meditation on the possibility of moral resistance.

3. Antoinette's Ethical Dilemmas and Choices: from "Self-identification" to "Ethical Fragmentation"

Antoinette's trajectory in *Wide Sargasso Sea* traces a tragic arc of ethical disintegration: from a childhood already fractured by racial exclusion, familial estrangement, and colonial violence, to an adulthood further shattered by patriarchal and imperial power. Her journey reveals how external forces perpetually erode her sense of self and foreclose the possibility of stable ethical belonging. This process—marked by the impossibility of secure self-identification, the imposition of colonial and patriarchal definitions of identity, and the ultimate collapse into extreme resistance—exemplifies the "ethical fragmentation" at the heart of colonial oppression.

3.1 The Fragmentation of Multiple Ethical Identities: A Total Lack of Belonging

From birth, Antoinette's ethical identity is caught in a "neither/nor" paradox—this serves as the root of her ethical dilemmas. As a Creole—a European descent yet born and brought up in the Caribbean—she is rejected by both "English women [who] call [her] 'white nigger'" (Rhys, 2000, p. 85) and the Black community, which labels her a "white cockroach" (85), a target for venting racial grievances. She once says to Rochester: "So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all" (85). This dual exclusion deprives her "natural identity" of any foundation for group recognition.

Within her family, her position is equally marginal. Her father "drank himself to death" (24) and indulged in numerous affairs; his early death and disreputable reputation leave her without ethical validation from the paternal line. Her mother Annette, consumed by poverty and grief after her husband's death, pours all her energy into her sickly son Pierre, showing coldness—even disgust—toward Antoinette. She once scolds her for wearing a dirty dress and embarrassing her in front of visitors. This emotional deprivation within the family deepens the conflict between her ethical longing for "belonging" and the reality of loss.

3.2 Triple Oppression in the Ethical Environment: The Collusion of Colonialism, Patriarchy, and Family

Antoinette's living environment reinforces her ethical predicaments from multiple dimensions, weaving an impenetrable net of oppression.

Though slavery was abolished in 19th-century Jamaica, the racial hierarchy forged by colonial history remained entrenched: whites at the top, mulattoes in the middle, and Black people at the bottom (Jin, 2018; Liu, 2021). The Cosway estate, a legacy of the colonial economy, becomes a focal point of racial tensions—Black hostility toward the descendants of former slave owners manifests directly in violence: her mother's horse is poisoned, their home is burned down, her brother Pierre dies in the riots, and her mother is driven to madness by trauma. These events plunge her into a "space of fear" from childhood, shattering any ethical vision of "home" as a place of safety and continuity.

Simultaneously, colonial cultural clashes further fracture her cultural identity: raised by Christophine, her Black nurse, she is steeped in Creole culture with its traditions, language, and customs. However, after her family falls into poverty, her mother's remarriage to Mr. Mason—a British colonist—subjects her to forced "civilization": she is compelled to adopt British food, servants, and education. She begins falling into a state of cultural aphasia: "I was glad to be like an English girl but I missed the taste of Christophine's cooking" (Rhys, 2000, p. 30), where she can neither fully embrace British culture nor return to her familiar Creole roots.

As a woman, she is perpetually under the control of patriarchal structures. Mr. Mason, as her stepfather, imposes British culture under the guise of "civilizing"—essentially asserting power by controlling her lifestyle. The convent education, which emphasizes chastity as "flawless crystal that, once broken, can never be mended" (45), ties female worth to moral standards approved by men, further eroding her sense of autonomy. This discipline preordains her as a "male possession" even before marriage, foreshadowing her objectification in later life.

Far from being an ethical sanctuary, the family amplifies her predicaments. Her father's absence and negative legacy leave her with no healthy understanding of "men" or "marriage"; her mother's coldness and emotional favoritism teach her to live with the experience of "unlovability," embedding sensitivity and insecurity deep within her. This emotional deprivation means she has no basic family support to rely on when facing external oppression.

3.3 From Repressive Compliance to Destructive Defiance: The Tragic Trajectory of Antoinette's Ethical Choices

Shaped by the suffocating constraints of colonial and patriarchal power, Antoinette's ethical choices trace a downward spiral—from passive survival to catastrophic rebellion. Each decision, rooted in a desperate search for belonging, becomes a step deeper into ethical entrapment, ultimately culminating in destruction that mirrors the annihilation of her selfhood. This trajectory exposes how systemic oppression erodes the very capacity for moral agency, reducing "choice" to a series of reactions against an inescapable ethical void.

3.3.1 Pre-marital Survival: Silence as a Compromised Ethical Strategy

In her formative years, Antoinette's ethical choices are defined by a strategy of defensive silence—born from the recognition that resistance in a fractured ethical environment would be futile. As a Creole caught between racial worlds, she learns to prioritize survival over self-assertion. When taunted by Black children, she "walked fast" (Rhys, 2000, p. 20) without resisting; when her mother Annette's horse is poisoned, she conceals the truth to avoid provoking her mother's anger and anxiety. These choices are not acts of forgiveness but of calculated retreat: in a world where her ethical identity is already precarious, any challenge to the status quo risks inviting further harm.

This silence reflects a painful surrender of ethical belonging. The stick she keeps by her bed symbolizes a latent desire to defend herself (62), yet it remains unused—a testament to her isolation. With no family support and no communal anchor, she abandons the pursuit of recognition, reducing her ethical horizon to mere physical survival. Antoinette is, in essence, an ethical orphan; her pre-marital choices accept this orphanhood as inevitable, laying the groundwork for her later vulnerability.

3.3.2 Marital Misjudgment: Trust as a Tragic Miscalculation

Antoinette's marriage to Rochester is arranged by Mr. Mason and his son Richard Mason. Before the ceremony, however, she attempts to refuse the marriage—a sign of resistance to the arrangement, likely stemming from fear that their union would mirror her mother's unhappy marriage to Mr. Mason.

Yet she also hopes to gain social status and a sense of security from Rochester, a British man—a prospect she longs for. Having endured the arson attack by Black community members and the malice of those around her, she refuses to live in fear for the rest of her life. Thus, as soon as Rochester promises her "peace, happiness, safety" (66)—the very things she most desires—she chooses to accept the marriage.

From the outset, Rochester's courtship and marriage to Antoinette are framed as a power transaction, not a union of mutual regard. As a younger son denied inheritance in Britain, he views the marriage as a means to secure wealth: "I have a modest competence now," he writes to his father, emphasizing the financial gain (59). For Antoinette, however, the marriage represents a chance to realize her ethical longing for "home" and belonging. She does experience a brief period of happiness after marriage, but she is "not used to happiness," which "makes me [her] afraid" (77). One night, she says to Rochester: "If I could die. Now, when I am happy. Would you do that? You wouldn't have to kill me. Say die and I will die" (77)—a line that reveals her obsessive attachment to love and her morbidly intense dependence on Rochester.

The good times are short-lived. When Daniel—Antoinette's half-brother—spreads rumors about her family, Rochester develops a dislike for her. Antoinette feels her sense of security crumble and realizes his affection has been a facade. His coldness and his affair with Amélie (a betrayal of trust) mark a critical ethical rupture: the relationship she hoped to heal her sense of alienation has become a tool of further exploitation.

3.3.3 Ethical Collapse: Destruction as the Last Resort

The ethical collapse triggered by colonial power culminates in Antoinette's profound alienation—a

separation from herself, her community, and her sense of moral purpose. This alienation is most vividly symbolized by her forced renaming and her final act of destruction, which reveal the extent of her ethical fragmentation.

After Daniel betrays Antoinette by spreading rumors about her family to Rochester, Rochester begins calling her "Bertha"—a typical British name—abandoning "Antoinette," the name tied to her Creole heritage and her identity as Annette's daughter. "He wants to make Antoinette resemble an English woman and hides her Creole personality by giving her the new name" (Aljohani, 2019, p. 12). Through this renaming, Antoinette is subjected to Rochester's psychological manipulation: he tries to transform her into an obedient wife, cut her off from her own culture, and convince her that she would inherit her mother's "madness." This act symbolizes the denial and deprivation of women's subjective self, identity, and personal freedom at the hands of male power. Though Antoinette protests— "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name" (Rhys, 2000, p. 121)—Rochester insists: "you must be Bertha" (112). Her protest is futile. This linguistic violence completes her alienation from her identity and culture, leaving her adrift in a world that refused to recognize her existence.

Stripped of her name by patriarchy, Antoinette loses her identity and voice in both colonial and marital contexts. And her further imprisonment in the attic robs her of her belongings, freedom, and dignity. As she murmurs: "They have taken everything. What am I doing here? Who am I?" (147). To escape this confinement and oppression, she decides to set fire to Thornfield Hall—an act that is both a desperate form of resistance and a symptom of her ethical fragmentation. For her, fire is a tool to reclaim agency in a world that denies her any: by destroying the space that imprisons her, she rejects the colonial ethical order that has dehumanized her. This act is not rational or "ethical" by conventional standards; it is the product of a mind unmoored from the ethical frameworks that once gave her life meaning. For Antoinette, fire is the only language left to assert her humanity—a final, tragic refusal to be defined by colonial power.

Antoinette's trajectory reveals the tragic logic of ethical choice under oppression: from silence that surrenders belonging, to trust that enables exploitation, to destruction that confirms powerlessness. Each step is shaped not by free will, but by the absence of viable alternatives in a world where her humanity is never guaranteed. Her tragedy is not a failure of character, but a testament to how colonial ethics annihilate the very possibility of moral agency.

4. Rochester's Ethical Choices: Ethical Stance and Alienation Under Colonial Power

In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester is often portrayed as a tragic figure—a man burdened by a loveless, arranged marriage to a "mad" woman, whose suffering elicits sympathy. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, dismantles this narrative, revealing Rochester as an active agent of colonial and patriarchal oppression. His ethical choices, rooted in racial superiority, gendered dominance, and material greed, not only destroy Antoinette's life but also expose his own profound alienation—an "ethical disablement" where power

and self-interest erode the capacity for moral responsibility. Through the lens of Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism, Rochester's trajectory emerges as a case study in how colonial systems distort human ethics, reducing relationships to transactions of control and individuals to tools of power.

4.1 Ethical Presuppositions: Racial Supremacy and Patriarchal Hegemony

Rochester arrives in the Caribbean not as a blank slate, but as a carrier of British colonial ideology—an ethical framework that positions white European men as the apex of "civilization" and justifies their domination over colonized peoples, women, and cultures. These presuppositions, forged by his upbringing in Victorian Britain's rigid class and gender hierarchies, shape every decision he makes—from his view of marriage to his contempt for Creole society.

At the core of his worldview is a belief in racial superiority. As a younger son of a British aristocratic family, Rochester is steeped in the imperialist myth that white Europeans are morally and culturally superior to the "savages" they colonize. This myth manifests in his visceral rejection of the Caribbean landscape and its people. Upon his first ride through the island, he describes the scenery as "too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near" (Rhys, 2000, p. 59). This litany of "too much" reveals not mere aesthetic distaste, but colonial anxiety: the Caribbean's vibrancy and abundance threaten his sense of order—an order that demands "proper" restraint and hierarchy. For Rochester, the island's "excess" is a sign of its "uncivilized" nature, justifying his role as a "tamer" of both land and people.

His contempt for Creole culture extends to the people who embody it. Christophine—Antoinette's Black nurse and a practitioner of obeah—becomes a particular target of his disdain. He thinks her language "horrible" (71); he thinks her trailing of dress on the floor "is not a clean habit" (71); he even thinks that "she looks so lazy. She dawdles about" (72). Additionally, he dismisses her wisdom as "nonsense" (89) and resents her influence over Antoinette, seeing her as a threat to his authority. When Christophine confronts him about his mistreatment of Antoinette— "Everybody know that you marry her for her money and you take it all. And then you want to break her up" (125)— he responds with rage, not guilt. Her challenge to his power violates his ethical hierarchy: in his view, a Black woman has no right to judge a white man. As Nie Zhenzhao (2014) might argue, this racial arrogance reflects a distortion of the "human factor" in ethics—where rationality is replaced by prejudice, and empathy by entitlement.

Rochester's ethical presuppositions are further shaped by patriarchal ideology, which reduces women to property and tools for male advancement. In Victorian Britain, the law and social norms dictated that women were legally "covered" by their husbands: a wife's property, earnings, and even identity became her husband's possession (Wang & Zhang, 2005). As a younger son, Rochester is denied inheritance—a blow to his masculine pride, as the patriarchal order equates a man's worth with his ability to accumulate and control wealth. But by marrying Antoinette, he could enjoy the financial security her dowry provides and reclaim his status. He writes to his father, "I will never be a disgrace to you or to my dear brother the son you love. No begging letters, no mean requests. None of the furtive shabby manoeuvres of a younger son" (Rhys, 2000, p. 59). He even admits: "I have not bought her, she has bought me" (59)—a confession

that strips marriage of any ethical or emotional meaning, reducing it to a transaction.

This view of women as property governs his treatment of Antoinette. He controls her finances, dictates her movements, and ultimately seeks to erase her identity. When he renames her "Bertha"—a name with no connection to her Creole heritage—he is not merely choosing a "prettier" name; he is asserting ownership, reshaping her into a figure that fits his narrative of dominance. For Rochester, this is not unethical; it is his right. His ethical framework demands that those lower in the hierarchy—women, colonized peoples—submit to those above, and any resistance is seen as a violation of the "natural order."

4.2 The Contradiction of Ethical Choices: From Attraction to Suppression

Rochester's ethical choices are marked by a profound contradiction: his brief, superficial attraction to Antoinette is gradually supplanted by deliberate cruelty—a shift that reveals how colonial ethics prioritize power over human connection. This contradiction exposes the "alienation" at the heart of his character—an estrangement from genuine emotion, caused by his relentless pursuit of control.

Initially, Rochester is drawn to Antoinette—not for who she is, but for what she represents: exoticism, and a means to an end. He describes her as "beautiful" (Rhys, 2000, p. 59), but acknowledges that "I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did" (78). This attraction is rooted in curiosity and loneliness, not empathy. He sees her as a "novelty" of the colonies, a distraction from his own sense of failure as a younger son. His interest fades as soon as she resists his attempts to control her—or, more precisely, as soon as his colonial insecurities are triggered.

The turning point comes when Daniel spreads rumors about her family's "history of madness" and hints at an alleged "immorality" in her past (80). For Rochester, these rumors are not just gossip: "It was as if I'd expected it, been waiting for it" (82). Rather than investigating the truth, he embraces the rumors, using them to justify his cruelty. This choice reflects Nie Zhenzhao's (2022) observation that ethical choices often pit "human factors" (empathy, rational inquiry) against "animal factors" (fear, desire for control). For Rochester, the "animal factor" prevails: he prioritizes protecting his status over seeking justice.

His cruelty takes deliberate, calculated forms. He begins to isolate Antoinette: "He always sleeps in his dressing-room now and the servants know. If I [Antoinette] get angry he is scornful and silent, sometimes he does not speak to me for hours…" (Rhys, 2000, p. 90). Then he starts calling her "Bertha," depriving her of her identity. Most brutally, he engages in an affair with Amélie—a Black maid—without any regard for Antoinette's presence. This is not mere infidelity; it is a public humiliation, designed to remind Antoinette of her powerlessness: he can replace her with anyone, at any time, because she is his property.

Rochester's suppression of his own fleeting affection for Antoinette and his active cultivation of cruelty exposes the alienating effect of colonial ethics. He becomes so consumed with maintaining dominance that he is unable to form genuine human connections. "I'll take her in my arms, my lunatic. She's mad but mine, mine" (136). His wealth and status are hollow: he remains emotionally stunted, trapped in a cycle of domination that leaves him as isolated as the woman he imprisons. As Nie Zhenzhao (2014)

argues, such alienation is the inevitable result of prioritizing "natural will" (instincts for power) over "rational will" (ethical responsibility). Rochester's choices make him not just an oppressor, but a victim of the very system he upholds—unable to experience love, trust, or even self-awareness.

4.3 Contrast with Jane Eyre: The Manufacture of a "Madwoman"

To fully grasp the ethical implications of Rochester's choices in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, we must contrast them with his portrayal in *Jane Eyre*—a contrast that reveals the deliberate, active role he plays in manufacturing Antoinette's tragedy. In Brontë's novel, Rochester is framed as a passive victim of circumstance; in Rhys's revision, he emerges as a calculated perpetrator, whose ethical failures are central to the "madwoman" myth.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is a spectral figure, her "madness" presented as a congenital curse. Rochester describes her as a madwoman: "… and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations!" (Bronte, 2016, p. 662) He positions himself as a helpless bystander, forced to hide her in the attic to "protect" others. This narrative erases his agency: it suggests Bertha's fate is inevitable, unrelated to his actions.

Wide Sargasso Sea shatters this illusion. Rhys shows that "madness" is not a natural condition but a construction—one Rochester actively engineers to justify his cruelty. His renaming of Antoinette as "Bertha" is the first step: by stripping her of her name, he severs her from her identity, making it easier to pathologize her. He then systematically provokes her, driving her to the brink of breakdown. By the time he imprisons her in the attic, he has successfully rewritten her story: she is no longer Antoinette, the Creole woman wronged by colonialism, but "Bertha," the "mad" threat to his happiness.

This contrast reveals the ethical hypocrisy of colonial narratives. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester's violence is excused as a necessary evil; in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it is exposed as a choice—one made to protect his power and reputation. As Christophine scolds him: "It is in your mind to pretend she is mad. … She will be like her mother. You do that for money?" (Rhys, 2000, p. 132). Rochester's refusal to acknowledge this responsibility—his insistence on framing himself as a victim—exemplifies the "ethical disablement" of colonialism: it allows perpetrators to disavow their cruelty by blaming the colonized for their own oppression.

Moreover, this contrast highlights the "artificiality" of the "madwoman" trope. Antoinette's breakdown is not the result of inherited "madness," but of sustained psychological violence: the loss of her name, her culture, her freedom, and her sense of self—all at Rochester's hands. His decision to lock her in the attic is not an act of "mercy," but of erasure: he seeks to eliminate all traces of the woman he failed to control, ensuring his version of events (of a "sane" British man burdened by a "mad" colonized wife) prevails.

In this light, Rochester's character in *Wide Sargasso Sea* serves as a powerful critique of colonial ethics. He is not just a flawed individual, but a product of a system that rewards cruelty, devalues empathy, and equates power with morality. His alienation—his inability to love, to regret, or to recognize his own humanity—mirrors the alienation of the colonial project itself: a system that destroys both the colonized

and the colonizer, leaving only emptiness in its wake.

Rochester's ethical journey in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a study in moral decay. From his racial and patriarchal presuppositions, to his contradictory choices that prioritize power over connection, to his active role in manufacturing Antoinette's tragedy, he embodies the "ethical disablement" of colonialism. By contrasting him with his *Jane Eyre* counterpart, Rhys forces us to confront an uncomfortable truth: the "madwoman in the attic" is not a product of fate, but of the choices made by those who wield colonial and patriarchal power. In Rochester's story, we see the high cost of a world where dominance is mistaken for virtue—and where the most unethical choices are disguised as "necessary" or "natural."

5. The Ethical Choices of Christophine and Daniel: Resistance, Revenge, and the Fragility of Colonial Ethics

Though secondary characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Christophine and Daniel occupy pivotal roles in shaping the novel's ethical landscape. Their choices—rooted in loyalty, resistance, and resentment—mirror the contradictions of colonial society: Christophine embodies a counter-ethic of care and defiance, while Daniel's actions expose the toxic underbelly of racial and class oppression. Together, their ethical stances illuminate the fragility of the colonial ethical order, revealing how systemic injustice forces marginalized individuals into impossible moral positions.

5.1 Christophine: Ethical Resistance through Loyalty and Defiance

Christophine emerges as a moral anchor in a world of ethical decay. Her choices, rooted in loyalty to Antoinette and a rejection of colonial and patriarchal norms, offer a radical alternative to the exploitation and dehumanization that define Rochester's ethics.

At the core of Christophine's ethical stance is unwavering loyalty to Antoinette—forged in the shared marginalization of Creole and Black communities under colonial rule. Unlike other servants who abandon the Cosway family after Emancipation, Christophine remains, providing both emotional and practical support: she cooks, mends clothes, and offers companionship that gives Antoinette a sense of security—especially during periods when her own mother ignores her. This loyalty transcends the master-servant dynamic of colonialism; it is an act of ethical solidarity, rooted in a recognition of their shared vulnerability. Her decision to stay is a quiet rebellion against the colonial logic that reduces relationships to transactions.

Christophine's ethics also manifest in her unflinching defiance of colonial power. When Mr. Mason and Rochester demand that she accept "civilized" training, she refuses to defer to their higher status and scoffs at their views. She displays deep pride in Creole culture, fiercely defending her dignity and heritage while challenging colonial claims to "civilization" and moral superiority. As Zhang (2009, p. 129) notes, she is an "anti-colonial fighter"—one who resists colonialists and represents the force that confronts and struggles against white colonizers like Rochester.

Yet Christophine's ethics are not without conflict. She faces a dilemma when Antoinette begs for a love potion: granting the request violates her own belief in genuine connection, but refusing risks abandoning

Antoinette to further abuse. Her eventual decision to provide the potion, albeit reluctantly, reflects the tragic choices forced on marginalized individuals in colonial societies: she must choose the "lesser evil" to protect those she loves. This dilemma underscores the ethical cost of oppression: even acts of care are distorted by the need to navigate systems of power.

5.2 Daniel: Ethical Distortion through Resentment and Revenge

Daniel represents a darker facet of colonial ethics: his choices, driven by resentment and a desire for revenge, expose how racial and class oppression can twist morality into a weapon of self-destruction.

Daniel's ethical stance is shaped by systemic deprivation. As the illegitimate son of a white planter, he is denied inheritance, status, and belonging. He lives in a shabby cabin—a stark reminder of his exclusion from both white and Black communities. This marginalization breeds bitterness, which he directs not at the colonial system, but at Antoinette—another "outsider," yet one with greater privilege. His decision to spread rumors about her "madness" and "immorality" to Rochester is a calculated act of revenge. For Daniel, this is a rare opportunity to wield power, even if it comes at the cost of another's suffering. Feng Tao (2024, p. 99) argues that such choices reflect the "distortion of psychological needs" under oppression: when love, respect, and security are denied, individuals may lash out at those perceived as "weaker" to regain a sense of control. Moreover, Daniel often models himself after his idealized image of the British: his words and deeds adhere to "British style," and the furnishings in his cabin (a red-fringed tablecloth, a black-and-gilt clock) bear a striking resemblance to those of Rochester's Thornfield Estate (a red carpet, red curtains, a gilded clock) (Zhang, 2009, p. 130). This further reveals his internalization of colonial values: he measures worth through material success, yet lacks the means to achieve it legitimately—leaving resentment as his only currency.

Daniel's actions accelerate the novel's ethical collapse. His rumors provide Rochester with a justification for cruelty, turning Antoinette's vulnerability into a weapon against her. In this way, Daniel becomes an unwitting agent of colonial oppression: his desire for revenge reinforces the very systems that harm him. His tragedy lies not in his anger, but in his choice to direct it at another victim rather than the structures that create their shared suffering.

5.3 Summary

Though their ethical choices stand in opposition, Christophine and Daniel together expose the moral bankruptcy of colonial society. Christophine's loyalty and defiance offer a glimpse of a counter-ethic—one rooted in care, solidarity, and resistance—while Daniel's resentment reveals how oppression can corrupt even the desire for justice.

Their roles in Antoinette's tragedy are intertwined: Christophine's expulsion removes Antoinette's last line of defense, while Daniel's rumors provide Rochester with the pretext to destroy her. In their contrasting fates, Rhys underscores a painful truth: colonialism leaves no one unscathed. Even those who resist (like Christophine) are silenced; those who succumb to its logic (like Daniel) are left empty. Their ethical choices, in the end, are both a mirror and a warning: they reflect the rot at the heart of colonial ethics, and remind us that systems built on domination cannot sustain life—only destruction.

6. Conclusion

This study, which analyzes the ethical choices of Antoinette and Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea* through the framework of Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism, reveals how colonialism and patriarchy jointly precipitate "ethical fragmentation" and how alienation becomes an inevitable outcome of colonial ethics. It further explores the significance of this exploration for understanding ethical issues in postcolonial literature and offers reflections on contemporary racial and gender relations.

Antoinette's and Rochester's ethical choices—intertwined and mutually reinforcing—collectively constitute the "ethical fragmentation" at the heart of the novel. Rooted in a Creole ethical environment defined by simplicity and mutual care, Antoinette initially seeks belonging and trust. Yet her choices—from repressive silence to desperate longing for love and security in marriage, and finally to destructive resistance—gradually collapse under the onslaught of colonial power. Her trajectory reflects the erosion of an ethical order based on connection and respect, replaced by a sense of powerlessness and disorientation.

Driven by colonial presuppositions of racial superiority and patriarchal hegemony, Rochester treats marriage as a transaction, suppresses emotional bonds for the sake of power, and actively constructs Antoinette's "madness" to justify his cruelty. His choices expose the hypocrisy of colonial ethics: under the guise of "civilization," they legitimate exploitation and dehumanization. Together, their interactions—her trust met with betrayal, his domination met with despair—rupture the possibility of ethical reciprocity, reducing human relations to a cycle of oppression and destruction.

Alienation, thus, emerges as the inevitable result of colonial ethics. Antoinette's loss of name, culture, and freedom signifies the alienation of self; Rochester's inability to form genuine emotional bonds—despite his wealth and power—reflects the alienation of the colonizer, trapped in a system of domination that poisons even his own humanity. Secondary characters like Christophine and Daniel further underscore this inevitability: Christophine's resistance is marginalized, and Daniel's resentment is twisted into destructive revenge—both victims of a colonial order that corrupts all ethical possibilities.

This study contributes to the understanding of ethical issues in postcolonial literature by highlighting how *Wide Sargasso Sea* deconstructs the myth of "civilized" colonial ethics. By reimagining the "madwoman in the attic" as a product of sustained ethical violence rather than congenital fate, Rhys exposes the complicity of colonial discourse in manufacturing suffering. This analysis—grounded in ethical literary criticism—demonstrates that postcolonial literature is not merely a critique of political oppression, but a profound meditation on the distortion of morality under systems of power: how colonialism erodes empathy, normalizes cruelty, and redefines "ethics" to serve domination.

For contemporary society, the novel's ethical tragedy offers critical insights into addressing racial and gender tensions. It warns against reducing complex human relations to hierarchies of power— as seen in Rochester's racial and gendered arrogance. It also emphasizes the importance of recognizing marginalized voices: Antoinette's silencing and Christophine's marginalization remind us that ethical progress requires amplifying those rendered invisible by systemic injustice. In an era still grappling with

racism, sexism, and cultural conflict, *Wide Sargasso Sea* urges us to confront how power imbalances corrupt ethical judgment and to strive for a society where equality and mutual respect form the basis of human interaction.

References

Ai, Q. (2011). *Dwelling Narrowness of the Soul—On the Ethical Ideas in Wide Sargasso Sea* (Master's thesis). Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University.

--. (2013). Endless Sargasso Sea and ceaseless pain—an analysis of the tragic life of the male protagonist in *Wide Sargasso Sea* from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. *Language and Culture Research*, (02), 194-198.

Aljohani, F. O. (2019). *Wide Sargasso Sea*: Antoinette's living spaces as a case study. *Arab World English Journal*, *10*(228), 1-18.

Bronte, C. (2016). *Jane Eyre*. Tianjin: Tianjin People's Publishing House.

Darakhshan, R. (2018). Feminist Concerns in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*: An Analysis. *The Creative Launcher*, *2*(6), 240-245.

Feng, T. (2024). Ethical choice and psychological needs: exploring a new dimension of ethical literary criticism. *Foreign Literature Studies*, *46*(05), 94-106.

Halloran, N. V. (2006). Race, Creole, and National Identities in Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Phillips's *Cambridge*. *Small Axe*, *10*(3), 87-104.

Jia, Y., & Kang, Y. (2024). Bertha Mason in two different worlds—Reread *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *English Square*, (14), 64-69.

Jin, H. (2018). Slavery and abolition movement of British Atlantic world in 17th-18th century. *Social Sciences of Beijing*, (09), 57-69.

Lee, W., & Kim, J. (2018). Sexual Difference of Love in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Nineteenth Century Literature English*, *22*(2), 29-47.

Li, Z. (2024). Juliet's ethical dilemma and ethical choices in *Wool*. *An Appreciation of Changjiang Novels* (35), 62-65.

Liu, W. (2021). *The Rise of Sugar Plantations in British Caribbean from the Atlantic View* (Master's thesis). Yantai: Ludong University.

Nie, Z. (2011). Ethical literary criticism: ethical choice and Sphinx factor. *Foreign Literature Studies*, *33*(06), 1-13.

--. (2014). *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*. Beijing: Peking University Press.

--. (2022). Disaster impact, ethical choices, and literary narratives. *Zhejiang Academic Journal*, (01), 182-188.

--. (2022). Analyzing the implications of ethical selection and ethical choice. *Foreign Literature Studies*, *44*(06), 15-25.

Rashid, A. K. M. A. (2021). For the Drifting Sargasso Finds Its Way: Loss and Reconstruction of Antoinette's Identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, *22*(1), 50-55.

Rhys, J. (2000). *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin Books.

Wang, M. (2024). Tragic causes of the heroine in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Research and Commentary on Humanities and Arts*, *2*(3).

Wang, W., & Zhang, X. (2005). An analysis of Mr. Rochester and relative problems. *Journal of Hainan Normal University (Social Sciences)*, *18*(06), 99-101.

Xiao, J. (2014). Rewriting, querying and methods of historical witness—on the colonialist way of writing racial issues in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. *Academic Monthly*, *46*(08), 144-152.

Xie, X. (2017). Interpretation of the themes of *Wide Sargasso Sea* from the perspective of ecocriticism. *Language Planning*, (21), 34-35.

Xu, X. (2022). The Ecofeminist Interpretation of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Literature Education*, (12), 70-72.

Zhang, F. (2009). Voices of the "subalterns"—discourse of the post-colonial resistance in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Contemporary Foreign Literature,* (01), 125-132.

Zheng, Y., & Zhang, Y. (2024). A research on ethical choices in *Crime and Punishment* under the perspective of literary ethical criticism. *Russian in China*, *43*(03), 42-49.