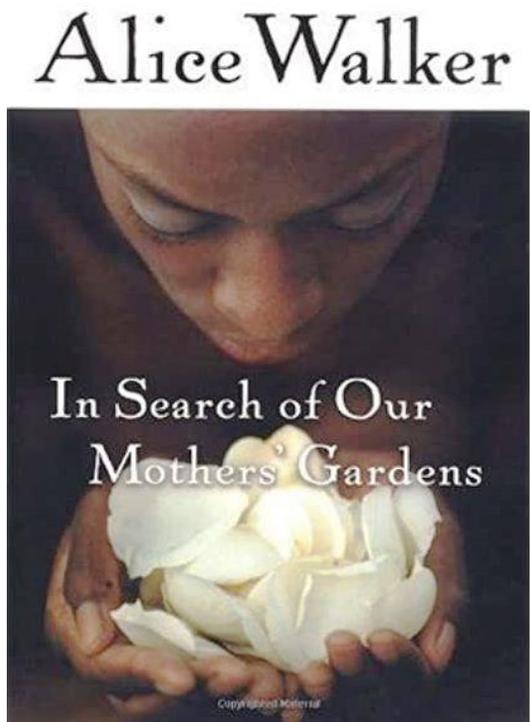


'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens' Alice Walker



B.A. III English Literature:
Paper Third

Alice Walker

- ❖ Alice Walker (born February 9, 1944) is an Afro-American novelist, short story writer, poet, and social activist.
- ❖ In 1982, she wrote the novel *The Color Purple*, for which she won the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize.
- ❖ She also wrote the novels *Meridian* (1976) and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970).
- ❖ She coined the term *womanist* to mean "A black feminist or feminist of color" in 1983.



'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens'

- ▶ The essay *'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens'* is part of a collection of literary pieces named *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*.
- ▶ *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* was composed by Alice Walker and published in 1983.
- ▶ It is a collection 36 pieces that includes essays, articles, reviews, statements, and speeches.
- ▶ The prescribed essay discusses the black women writers' struggle for freedom of self-expression.
- ▶ Alice Walker try to search the roots of their creativity.
- ▶ Alice Walker talks about her search of the African American women's suppressed talent and artistic skills.
- ▶ Their talents and skill are lost because of slavery and a forced way of life.
- ▶ Walker builds up her arguments from historical events as well as the collective experiences of African Americans, including her own.

The Observations of Jean Toomer, a Poet in the early 1920s

- ▶ In the first paragraph of the essay, she mentions the experiences of a American writer called Jean Toomer.
- ▶ He is a man who observed that Black women are unique because they possessed intense spirituality in them.
- ▶ Their spirituality was intact in spite of the fact that their bodies had to endure various kinds of punishment in every single day of their lives.
- ▶ Their intense spirituality and endurance made them **Saints** - crazy, pitiful saints.
- ▶ Being black women, It was extremely hard to be a mother or a grandmother or even just a woman at that time.
- ▶ The mothers and grandmothers at that time endured all of this without any hope of better tomorrow.
- ▶ Because of this, they were not able to fully express themselves. They were held back by their racist society.



“Black Women are the Mules of the World”

- ▶ Alice Walker says that our grandmothers and mothers were “exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them, except as “the mule of the world”.
- ▶ Their dreams could not be understood by anyone not even by themselves. Thus, their creativity remained unknown and uncelebrated.
- ▶ Their talents were crushed as they were into loveless marriages and became mothers of children. There was no fulfilment in their lives Their lives were uneventful and joyless.
- ▶ Their bodies were work-worn and sexually abused. They were forced into prostitution without resistance.
- ▶ They were creators but their unused and unwanted talent made them insane.



“What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time?”

- ▶ Alice Walker says that these mothers and grandmothers were under the yoke of slavery. They had to work really hard for survival in plantations, bakeries, factories etc. Their bodies were broken and they were forced to bear children (eight, ten, fifteen, twenty children) that were usually sold.
- ▶ Becoming an artist and practice of art was a punishable crime for black men and women in America. They are not allowed to read, write, sing, paint, sculpt etc.. So, they couldn't pronounce their thoughts and emotions
- ▶ These “crazy”, “sainted” black women could have become great novelists, poets, singers, actors, essayists and short-story writers. But, their talents remained suppressed and stifled.
- ▶ In spite of all these odds and unfavorable conditions, they kept their creativity alive for centuries.
- ▶ To prove her point here, she refers to the singing talent of artists like [Bessie Smith](#), [Billie Holiday](#), [Nina Simone](#), [Roberta Flack](#), and [Aretha Franklin](#).



Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784): A Black Slave Girl

- ▶ For building her argument, Alice Walker refers to another black poet Phillis Wheatley: a Black slave girl with a poor health.
- ▶ She was captured at the age of seven from Africa and brought to America in 1761. She was sold to a wealthy merchant named John Wheatley.
- ▶ Phillis is a poet and a writer at her own right, but unfortunately, she wasn't able to do much with it because she was a slave.
- ▶ She lost her health, and eventually her life without fully expressing herself through her gift for poetry.
- ▶ She was poor and had to take care of several children. She was suffering from malnutrition, neglect and mental agonies. So, she died at very young age.
- ▶ She is now taken as a symbol of Afro-American feminist creativity and resistance.



Reference to Virginia Woolf's 'A Room of One's Own'

- ▶ Alice Walker quotes great British novelist Virginia Woolf's famous essay '*A Room of One's Own*'.
- ▶ Virginia Woolf says that in order to write fiction, a woman must have two things: (1) A room of her own with lock and key (2) Enough money to support herself.
- ▶ This was also requirement in the case of Black women who desired to become poets and novelist. But, they were not even in position to claim their own bodies that were the properties of someone else's.
- ▶ Phillis Wheatley also needed financial security and her own space to prolong her success as a poet. But her poverty and slavery was the reason of her short success.



Black Grandmothers & Alice Walker's Mother

- ▶ Alice Walker, being herself as a African American woman, presents the true accounts of black women to prove her point.
- ▶ It is true that slavery, forced pregnancies, poverty, and artistic suppression were the realities for the black women in the past.
- ▶ Still, the black grandmothers and mothers have been passing a collective knowledge and creativity down from one generation to another in different ways.
- ▶ To prove this point, she gives the example of a special quilt made by a anonymous Black woman of Alabama, some hundred years ago. This quilt is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags. It portrays the story of Crucifixion of Christ.
- ▶ Alice Walker has also experienced poverty in her childhood. She was born and raised by hardworking parents. They had to work day and night to provide for the family.
- ▶ She says that her mother may not be a poet, or novelist. But, she was an artist in the truest sense.
- ▶ Her mother's artistic side and creativity was manifested in her gardens and the beautiful flowers she used to grow.

Conclusion

- ▶ This essay is written to highlight the creativity and artistry of African American women of her mother and grandmother's time.
- ▶ These Black women were unable to express their talents and hone it to its full potential. T
- ▶ his essay is written to inform us about their stories, and of her discovery of her mother's garden.
- ▶ She was glad to know that it is possible for African American women to express themselves even unknowingly, that it is up to us to discover these "gardens."
- ▶ She is appealing to the readers in general that even though some people like our mothers and grandmothers seem talentless or artistically inferior, it doesn't mean that they really lack the talent. It just means that were not looking hard enough to find it.

(This presentation is made only for Teaching and Learning purpose. The images and content has been borrowed from different sources)

Thank You!

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