

## IN SEARCH OF MY MOTHER'S GARDEN

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**ABSTRACT:** Alice Walker is a Pulitzer Prize winner who has written several best-selling novels and has had her works inspire popular movies. In the work "In Search of My Mother's Garden", Walker (1983) explores the lived experience of her own mother through the perspective of African-American women both in the past and present. The words of Walker include the excluded and give a voice to Black women. This article will analyze how Black women used their voices to express their creativity. The article will first explore how Walker used her unique writing style and methodology to shine light on the creative spirit of Black women and how it was expressed in the face of daily discrimination, abuse and violence. The article will explore the various ways Black women demonstrated their creativity. The article will also compare the lives of creative white women and Black women to illustrate the differences in the origin and expressions of creativity. The article will next talk about the idolization of Black women as "saints" and if that perspective is warranted. The article makes use of the words of Walker herself and the author's personal narratives as examples of the resilient creativity of Black women in support of Walker's perspective.

### Introduction

My mother's name was Ora Mai. "Ms. Reese," as we affectionally called her, birthed and raised eight children, four boys, and four girls, and was a domestic abuse survivor. She supported herself and her children by working as a food service supervisor on the Fort Campbell Army Base in Kentucky for thirty years. My mother had a massive heart attack due to a life of imbalance and working much more than she played. Mom survived a myocardial infarction, but her life changed when she was declared disabled. Her medical condition forced Ora Mai to retire abruptly at the age of forty-nine. For the last twenty years of her life, she was active in her church and passed the time by planting a beautiful vegetable garden. My maternal grandmother Hattie raised fourteen children, nine girls, and five boys. "Mama" Hattie never worked outside of her home. Her husband Peter died early, and she never remarried. Mama Hattie also planted a beautiful garden, which helped to support her family. In the midst of unimaginable challenges they faced daily, both women chose to plant gardens, and I always wondered why.

## **In Search of Our Mother's Gardens**

Alice Walker's famous work "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" enlightened me when she wrote about Black women like my mother and grandmother. Walker wrote about black mothers and grandmothers throughout the past hundred years or more and portrayed them as hidden artists. Walker explains, "For these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not saints, but artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release" (230-231). The black woman was subject to the most humiliating and degrading existence possible. They were treated as sexual objects by the men in their lives, which included their owners, their lovers, or whoever took an interest at the moment. These women were not saints as Walker notes but were made into saints because of the pejorative treatment they received at the hands of others. Walker's work also paraphrased Okot p'Bitek's great poem when she wrote, "O, my clanswomen let us cry together! Let us mourn the death of our mother, the death of a queen...the creator of our stool is lost! And all the young women have perished in the wilderness" (Walker 231). The tone of the poem is beyond melancholic; it is hopeless. The mothers and grandmothers of centuries past endured a midnight that never gave the promise of a new day.

Nevertheless, they found reasons to live where no reason existed. Alice Walker helped me see the gardens of Ora Mai and "Mama" Hattie in a new light. Walker helped me see that the gardens they worked on every day meant more than the food it produced.

### **The Garden Metaphor**

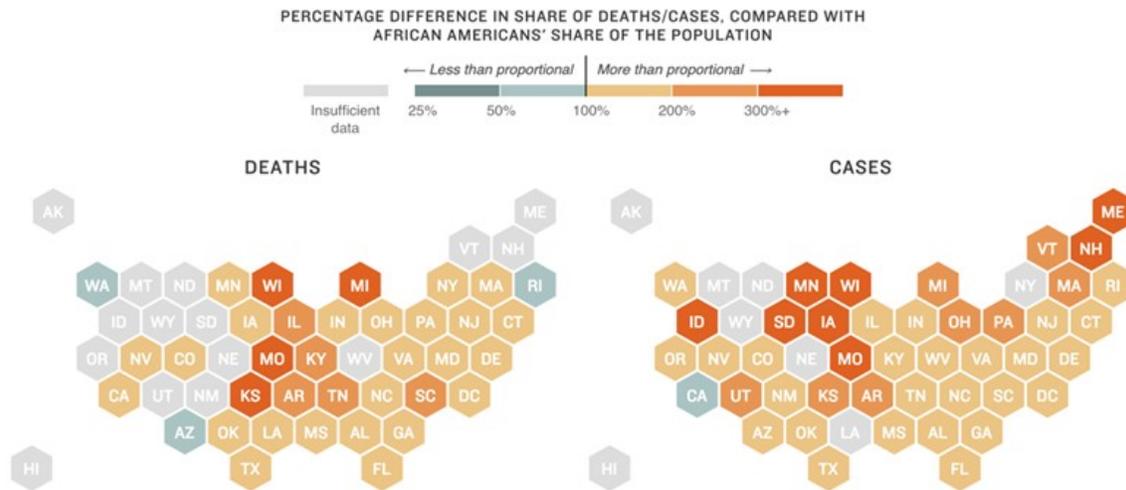
The metaphor of a garden used by Alice Walker can take on different meanings for different persons in different settings. Walker chose to use the metaphor of a garden to represent the fact that every person lives life in search of a garden. In her work, Walker portrays the garden as a space of peace and "somebodiness" where the gardener's life means something. In the African American experience, the search for a garden space requires a fight from the day they are born against racism and systemic disenfranchisement because of their skin color. The most current example of the fight African Americans are facing every day is the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. It has again revealed the precariousness of the African American family in this nation. In the beginning, COVID-19 did not appear to discriminate as it spread. However, as collected data has revealed, COVID-19 disproportionately affects African Americans because of the health disparities between whites and people of color (Godoy). The data shows that African Americans become sicker at a higher rate, are hospitalized longer, and die more frequently than white persons. COVID-19 has proved the adage "when a white person catches a cold, a black person gets pneumonia."

### **The Hidden Artist in the Garden**

The "artist" in African American women cannot be easily identified. Walker identified artistry as expressed in their spirituality, which is defined as a deep belief in the unseen world independent of religious affiliation. African American women have drawn strength from attending and singing in the church (235). Their active participation in the church was a conflation of church and lived experience that gave rise to creativity that seemed to keep life's madness and frustration under control.

Walker illustrated the hidden artistry of African American women when she juxtaposed author Virginia Woolf's life with that of author Phyllis Wheatley. Walker points to the classic work of

## Deaths and Cases Disproportionately Affect African Americans In Most States



*Figure 1 NPR.com, "What Do Coronavirus Racial Disparities Look Like State by State?"*

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, and commenaxds Woolf because, "in order for a woman to write fiction she must have two things, a room of her own and money to support herself" (232). Walker points this out to acknowledge the difficulty of all women to be taken seriously as artists and creators in the early 1900s. Walker affirms the difficulty of even white women to express their artistry. However, Walker does point out that because Woolf was white, she could write and use her earnings to rent her own room and make enough money to support herself. Woolf's life ended when she committed suicide. Walker described the end of Woolf's life by writing, "any woman born with a great gift would have ended her days... having been hindered or thwarted by contrary instincts that she would most certainly lose her health or sanity" (232). Walker acknowledged both that Woolf's artistry contributed to her death and that she made a choice in the midst of mental illness to end her life and did not die at the hands of others who hated her.

In contrast, Phyllis Wheatley, a fellow author, battled poor health throughout her life yet managed to create meaning for her life when others saw her as meaningless. The "contrary instincts" Woolf experienced in her life was also the lived experience of Wheatley. She was captured as a slave at seven and forced to work for a cruel master. She lived the entirety of her life, wasting away in loveless relationships while raising children and writing poetry. Wheatley was still able to create great works of art in spite (or some would argue because of) the pain and anguish she experienced daily. The level of creativity she demonstrated was only limited by her circumstances. Unlike her white counterpart Woolf, Wheatley did not choose to die, but, like Woolf, she found a way to overcome her circumstances to express her creativity through her writing.

African American women artists like Phyllis Wheatley lived with two inhumane realities. The first reality was that they were forced to live life in a proverbial waiting room. They had to wait to see if their children would be sold away from their loving arms. They had to wait to see if the man who sired the child would play the role of a guest or a husband, or perhaps would be sold and not have any options. They would often wait a long time hoping for a good outcome for African American women, only to be perpetually disappointed. The other reality is that

these artists were forced to live in anonymity. They were unknown and dismissed, except for the few people within their family circle. The gifts of poetry, singing, writing, politics, and architecture went unacknowledged and unexpressed because there was no public outlet for them, and their gifts died with them. Even when these artistic, talented women had the opportunity to make something beautiful out of nothing, their contributions would often be stolen and go unattributed. Walker described one example in the following story, "In the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C, there hangs a quilt unlike any other in the world. In fanciful, inspired, and yet simple and identifiable figures. It is made of pieces of worthless rags that tell the story of the Crucifixion. The art is priceless. There is a note that says by an anonymous black woman in Alabama" (236).

### **How Artistry Survived in the Garden**

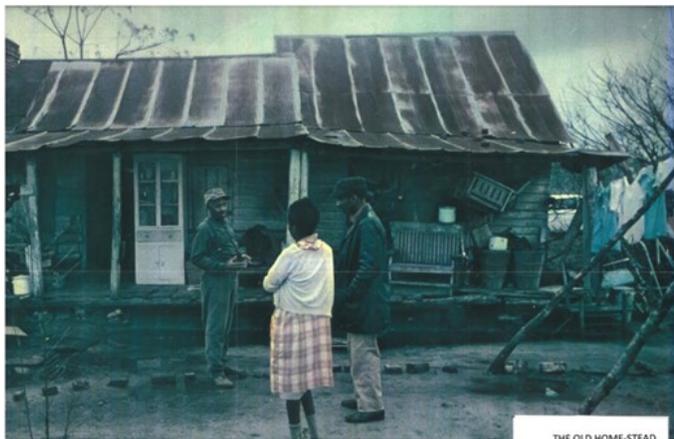
Walker asks her readers to consider the following question: What has kept the artistry and genius within these mothers and grandmothers alive century after century despite their circumstances? Poet Jean Toomer took a tour of the Southern states and referred to the African American women he observed: "as mules of the world" (Walker 230). His description denied them of a title that may have afforded them any semblance of humanity. Walker characterized Toomer's observations in the following way: "These crazy saints stared out at the world like lunatics, or quietly like suicides; and the 'God that was in their gaze was as mute as a stone" (230). In his opinion, African American women lived lives of mundanity and dreamed dreams that no one knew, including themselves. Walker sought to answer several questions about how African American women were able to achieve the impossible. How did these mothers and grandmothers maintain their sanity? How did they not only survive but thrive? How did they continue to create as they performed demeaning tasks like cooking, cleaning, and caring for the children of people who hated them? The author's own admission took her several years to come upon the answer, but she finally found it in her mother's flower garden. Walker described her revelation in the following way: "She grew more than fifty varieties of flowers. People would stop by her house and ask permission to walk the sacred space. My mother adorned whatever shabby house we lived in with flowers. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass and laid out new beds" (237).

Walker said that when her mother was in her garden, her face was radiant and there was a peacefulness in her soul. It seems that her mother's garden was an outdoor cathedral whose members were this variety of flowers. The music was provided by the sounds of the wind. Whatever she planted grew as if by magic. Walker's description shows that her mother found her connection with spirituality not in a Holy Book nor in a preacher spewing out platitudes that offered no real comfort for everyday struggles. Walker's mother's garden was her place of refuge and meaning that had been used by generations of women before her.

African American women found their voices in their gardens. Their voices were muted by law, tradition, and kin, yet they found their creative expression in small plots of land that they did not own on paper but worked and cared for with their souls. These artists found in their gardens a homegrown hope. The lashes of an angry master could not kill their creativity when they were working in the garden. The mutilations carved into their flesh by men and childbirth would not diminish their inner joy. Walker mused over how African American women's souls would have been robbed of amazing works of creativity if the world had successfully muted

the artistic genius of artists like Phyllis Wheatley, Lucy Terry, Zora Hurston, Nella Larsen, Bessie Smith, Elizabeth Catlett or Katherine Dunham (235).

### Portraits of Artistry in the Gardens



Portrait 1: "Mama" Rosa

This picture is of Rosa Dale, taken in 1925. "Mama" Rosa is the grandmother of Fred Dale, who married my oldest sister Margaret in 1966. The picture shows the land and home where she gardened and that she could own from "providential" means that were never fully known. "Mama" Rosa is the quintessential artist that Walker is celebrating. Rosa Dale had ten siblings and was born on a plantation that is now Camden, Alabama. During the slavery era, the land was owned by the Dale and McReynolds families. A split between the families occurred, and the land was divided between the two families. Their slaves were also

divided, and their families retained either the McReynolds or Dale's last name. "Mama" Rosa never learned to read or write, but she would use her garden's harvest to provide for her family. Despite her circumstances and limitations, this artist motivated her children and grandchildren to become physicians, educators, engineers, attorneys, and business owners. None of that would have happened without the provisions of "Mama" Rosa's garden.

In this picture is my Cousin Naomi. She is the widow of a pastor. Naomi planted a garden that produced the fruit and vegetables in the photograph. All of the produce was given away to persons in the community at no charge. After her husband died in 2012, she continued to grow the fruit and vegetables that supplements her meager pension. Cousin Naomi has received numerous commendations for her produce quality in local newspaper articles, and she shares her gift teaching gardening to other seniors. Naomi is well into her 80s and is still gardening.



Portrait 2: Cousin Naomi

"Mama" Rosa and Cousin Naomi are the epitomai of the "head ragged generals" that paved the way for their children and their children's children (Walker 238). Despite being denied the opportunities to participate fully in society, they found outlets for their creativity in their gardens that provided for their families. They ended up making long-lasting contributions to their communities, even in the midst of their circumstances. These women prove Walker's point that the artistry they expressed within their homes' confines allowed them to find

meaning for themselves despite the constraint society placed upon them.

## Conclusion

Alice Walker's work *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* is a literary masterpiece that provides a rare portrayal of African American women's resilience as expressed by their gardens. She takes readers on a trip back through time to experience the struggles of African Americans during slavery with her detailed descriptions of the cotton fields, the harsh overseers, the auction blocks, and other atrocities. Walker's discovery of the garden as the outlet for creativity and a space of refuge in her work provides a great insight into how common people could survive generation after generation of struggling while still maintaining their dignity and self-respect. My mother, Ora Mai, grew a remarkable garden for the last twenty-two years of her life. Although she has been away from me physically for twenty-five years, I can still remember seeing the faraway look in her eyes that had nothing to do with seeds and weeds. It never dawned on me before reading Walker's work that the plot of the ground meant so much to her. Alice Walker gave me a portrait of my mom that no camera can capture. I found peace and wept tears of gratitude for what the garden meant to her. There is a dire need for more gardens in America that can eventually grow seeds of peace for our black mothers and women, leading to the systemic change we need to see in our society.

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