Nannie Helen Burroughs: Lamplighter of the Impossible

LAKRISTA L. PAGE
North Carolina A & T State University, llpage@aggies.ncat.edu

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Abstract: Adult facilitators have limited resources highlighting exceptional Black women of our discipline. This historical analysis will attempt to uncover why Nannie Helen Burroughs was ostracized by the academy of Black intellectuals. The study is intended to contribute to the partial knowledge and understanding of Miss Burroughs.

Keywords: Black women, Adult Education History, Leadership, Race, Class and Gender, Inner Culture Marginalization

Introduction

Unfortunately, we live in a world where innovation and change are often met with skepticism and fear. The fight for equity and equality is still a viable subject, a fight even more so fought by Black women. We are subjected to the ascription of power imposed on old ideas of race and gender identity, into new forms of marginalization. As some things change, more things remain the same. Miss Nannie Helen Burroughs, our shero, the visionary, the educator, the dreamer and scholar was a consistent staple in the educational tapestry, but we know very little about this exceptional Black woman. What we do know of Miss Burroughs are only the basics. What truly unleashed her passion of creating a place where future Black females will learn and thrive? Was it her devout religious roots, or her Christian values which led her to embark on a socio-political crusade against the mores of the American machine?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Through internal coping mechanisms, gender identity, socio-economic reflections and the principles of Critical Race Theory; marginalization, isolation, racial oppression and microaggressions were used to analyze information from literature and interviews (Delgado & Stefanici, 2012, p. 167). The conceptual framework is the qualitative study is defined by Miles and Huberman (1994) as written product which “explains, either graphically or in a narrative form, the main things to be studied” (p. 18).

Historical Professionalism, Intellect and Reflection

Stephen Brookfield (1990) said, “Underlying all significant learning is the element of trust. Trust between teachers and students is the affective glue binding educational relationships together.” During the peak of Miss Nannie Helen Burroughs’ career as an educator she was indeed the glue Dr. Brookfield describes. Nannie Helen Burroughs was the American dream and then some.

Founding numerous educational and civic organizations which sparked invaluable change, Miss Burroughs ignited a new fight to bring recognition to Black women and their intellectual resourcefulness. In her plight of equity and equality for Black women and girls, Burroughs spoke candid about the importance of hard work, toil, sweat and sacrifice. In his thesis, R.R.S. Stewart quotes Miss Burroughs’ educational and civic goals as, “…I would someday have a school here in Washington that would give all girls a chance without political pull, and to help them overcome whatever handicaps they might have (p. 5). These dreams,
goals and virtues are apparent in her passionate rebuttal of W. E. B. DuBois’ principles of the academy. She bemoaned the face of people spending years in school getting one degree after another before entering the workplace.

Miss Burroughs was an active creator of black knowledge and the establishment of independence and self-efficacy. She spoke of the same ideals her male counterparts preached to the Black community. DuBois (1903) said, “One ever feels he two-ness – an American, and Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (p. 9). As Dr. Dubois speaks of a double consciousness, Miss Burroughs fought a triple consciousness that was not readily acknowledged. It is the Black female triple consciousness which is just as important as it discloses race, class and gender variables of that time. As both navigated the veil of various consciousness, Burroughs’ message of independence for her race and gender were met on deaf ears and ignored by her community of elite intellectuals. Her progressive ideals for the Black female and African-American race were ignored by Dubois, deemed the Father of the Black Intellectual Movement and the Talented Tenth.

While her thoughts on the transformation of the Black race were not far from her male counterparts, she was not recognized as an intellectual or contributor in the realm of progressive Black elites. Was her rejection built on her gender? Did her lack of attaining higher educational degrees a factor in her exclusion of these elite conversations? Miss Burroughs was a stark opposite of the humble, fearful Eurocentric definition of a Black woman. Her voice was raw; her message was inflamed with the to the point knowledge. Her radical enthusiasm for transformation and progression for the Black race was a message uttered by many of the progressives of her time. Miss Burroughs is often omitted from our collection of adult education history books.

One of the main intentions of this research is to offer a comparative analysis that decipher why Miss Burroughs’ influence on the field of Black Adult Education, was ignored. It is also to assess collective philosophies to the proliferation of truth regarding race, class and gender against the collective philosophies of the black elites (DuBois, Washington, Garvey, Cooper, Brown and Bethune) of her era.

Roundtable Activity

Guest will engage in a dialogue to explore and have a better understanding of the educational impact and contribution of this prolific black woman. In this continuous historic inquiry develops, the research question is: Why is Miss Nannie Helen Burroughs continuously omitted from main stream academic circle?

References