

Joey Tyson. By Andrew Salkey. Bogle L'Ouverture Publications Ltd., London 1974 Pp. 114

*Joey Tyson* is a fictional recapitulation of an important political event in Jamaica's history: the expulsion of Dr. Walter Rodney from the University of the West Indies in October of 1968.

Rodney, a Guyanese graduate of the University of the West Indies got his Ph.D. in 1966 from London University. His first teaching appointment was at the University College, Tanzania. In 1968 he returned to the University of the West Indies, but in October of that same year Dr. Rodney was served with an expulsion order at the airport while returning from a trip abroad. He was neither allowed to get off the plane nor talk to his wife, nor was he given any valid reason for his dismissal. This arbitrary act on the part of the Government was the starting point of campus protest by university students which soon spread to the rest of Kingston. Buses and cars were overturned and burnt, and shops and other buildings were smashed and set on fire.

In the novel, the author is very faithful to the historical facts as outlined above. The narrative starts with a bang as Dr. Buxton (Rodney) is served with his *Persona non grata* papers aboard the plane. The second chapter briefly describes Dr. Buxton's political views and his sympathies with the working class. The Water Commission workers, for example, were threatening to strike if the Commission did not set up a tribunal. The May Pen firemen had already staged a big demonstration protesting the delay of the promised better working conditions. The Fire Brigade workers were on strike because the Prime Minister had just rejected their legitimate overtime back-pay claim. On top of all this, unemployment was steadily on the rise and so was the crime rate. Corruption within the rank and file of the Government was also becoming unbearable. It is this disenchantment with the political *status quo* that gives such symbolic significance to Dr. Buxton's expulsion. It also explains why the students who marched downtown in protest found such a ready sympathiser in the ordinary folk on the street.

Most of the narrative deals with this demonstration and the Government's reaction to it. But while all this is going on, the three generations of the Tyson family, Joey, Mr. and Mrs. Tyson, and Gran'Pa and Gran'Ma Tyson become involved in the events. This portrait of the Tyson family and the depiction of the surrounding political ethos are very important features of the narrative. It is through them that we see how the things on the social and political scale intimately affect family life and family relationships.

Throughout the novel it is Mr. Tyson who is the mouthpiece of the author. His death towards the end of the story is, therefore, an appropriate climax to a narrative that describes a society which is not yet ready to accept his criticism and reforms. *Joey Tyson* can be seen as a bitter attack on the various elements of Jamaican life.

It attacks the University. In an early chapter we learn through a brief flashback that on the eve of Dr. Buxton's expulsion the University Chancellor had been summoned to a special cabinet meeting at which he had been asked to fire Dr. Buxton. In defending his lecturer, the Chancellor has no other concerns beyond "the preservation of the standards of academic freedom." He puts this on the same level as national interest and, in so doing, makes himself and the entire university vulnerable to criticism. In the eyes of the working class, he is not better than the Government that he sets out to criticize. It is this kind of ivory tower mentality that makes it very difficult for the working man to identify with the intellectual, even a Dr. Buxton, as Mr. Tyson finds out when he tries to convince his fellow workers that "Dr. Buxton is the working man's friend, the friend of the out-o-work, the friend of the down-an'-out."

Nobody expresses this skepticism better than Granpa Tyson. He asserts that University students were marching not for the poor people but for one of their own. He is convinced that the University student is too far removed from what it really means to be poor to understand it:

*You can't sit down in a classroom or walk in a march or hide out in a tenement yard, and say you learning about poor people. You got to be poor you'self...You can't learn some matters. You got to be born in it. You got to be it yourself. Learning about it is another way of putting off the remedy. Learning not near enough to what poverty is, what police brutality is, what hungry belly is, what the underneath of the garbage is. And it don't mean that you can't see the thing and imagine how it biting those it biting. Yes, you can imagine it and you can even learn about it, and it can make you cry, and you can write about it and shout about it and tell the whole wide world about it. But you will take it and make a toy and play games with it if you come from outside it. That's what I got 'gainst them student people. Learning is not enough. It got to be you itself... Learning is something different entirely.*

To Miss D's question of how this can be when some of the students come from ordinary poor people themselves, he says of the University,

*that university, that same place up there, is a house of confusion...it confuses more than it educate; it baffle more than it explain...It even turn poverty into something else, into a study-object, into something far, far away from the student and the university. So, if you poor, it convert you quick to thinking that you rich, or that you should be. Them sort of lessons doing a lot of damage Miss D.*

This old man's insight sheds light on the main tragedy of the developing nations. Their political, social and economic structure is in bad need of reform. Often times the peasantry, being the hardest hit, is ready and waiting for this reform, but it needs leadership, so it look to the University student to provide this guidance. While he is still at school, the University student shows signs of promise but as soon as he graduates, he forgets all the protest marches and speeches he made and embraces that same corruption that he had so bitterly attacked as a student. As Mr. Tyson puts it,

*After they graduate, all that talk evaporate, you know like rain when sun oome out. They join the big bosses then, one time quick as scissors. Now that they young and hot and don't got burdens, it suit them style. Little later is big car, big house, big party, big travel and big life.*

The author also criticizes the police for their unjustified brutality against the very people they are supposed to protect. Lisa complains about the way her two brothers had once been mistakenly arrested by the police and badly beaten. Her father was nearly shot by one policeman, also mistakenly. In their efforts to disband the marchers, one policeman teargasses a student with an aerosol canister aimed at the student's face and neck. Another one falls on a defenseless woman and repeatedly beats her with his baton leaving her for dead. As Lisa says, "These police cause more trouble than they prevent." Mr. Tyson expresses very well the author's sentiments when he says of the police:

*Those devils only brutalize poor people, when they patrol in strength, you know gun or no gun. They're a bunch of cowards, most of them. They only have brass face and gun play for poor defenseless people. This same West Kingston can bear plenty witness to that, plenty witness to Babylon brutality.*

As for the Government, in a very moving passage, Andrew Salkey shows how stupid some of the people running the country could be. The Prime Minister has just given an address to the nation concerning the current events and he is asking his cabinet members for some constructive criticism of his speech before he addresses the assembly the following day.

"So, what's your analysis of what I saw tonight?" He threw the question open.

"Well, let's see," the first friend said. "You quite rightly slapped the blame for the disturbances and the damage to property on the university marchers. I liked your phrase. What was it, now?" he hesitated.

"The litter of destruction and looting. 'I believe I said,' the Prime Minister helped.

"Yes, that's it. You didn't talk about the government's right to ban Buxton, but you said, if I'm not mistaken, that..." He hesitated again.

"All true Jamaicans will support the action of the government in condemning the events today!" The Prime Minister smiled.

"Sure. That's what you said. And that's great. And you touched on the fact that the government has very substantial evidence.. Yet again, he hesitated.

"The government has very substantial justification for banning Dr. Buxton."

"Good, not evidence. Justification. That's it. Nicely phrased. Very neat."

Of course in a very subtle way this is also a criticism of the Prime Minister himself who cannot do better than this in selecting a cabinet. As our forefathers put it, "Tell me with whom you keep company and I will tell you your habits."

Of farther-reaching consequences than this is the fact that because of corruption, the Government has allowed foreign powers to rob the country without raising as much as a finger in protest. As Mr. Tyson points out, eighty-three cents out of every dollar earned from the bauxite industry goes to Canada and from tourism, ninety-three cents. This, of course, would not have been possible if the government was not a sell-out. To quote Mr. Tyson, "For Canada to get that sort of benefit in the two major industries we've got, it means a few palms were well greased."

As bad as things may seem to be, *Joey Tyson* is far from being a pessimistic novel. The blood that has been shed has also in the process watered a seed that is bound to germinate and grow. There is a vision of a better day yet to come. On the eve of his death, Mr. Tyson prophesizes that:

*Some good days coming...I jus' know it. I think the government know it, too. They getting scared. Big 'fruid catching them, yes. When...young people start to move 'mongst yourselves with one heart, one love and one mind, right down at the bottom, it going to be the bigges' move this country ever see. When the poor and the downcas' get up as one and haul down the pappy-show, it going be the end of one set o' things and the start o' something new. I know it!*

Finally, I would like to say that in terms of expounding the political and educational convictions of Dr. Walter Rodney, the author has given the hero a fitting eulogy even before his death.

*Joey Tyson* has dramatic impact in both language and dialogue. There is also a sense of urgency. From the very first page the story moves quickly and without pause up to the very climax, Mr. Tyson's death. The author allows the reader no comic relief. One can also sense here an influence of classic training, for as in Greek drama, we have the unity of action, place and time. Seen from another perspective, one could call it a one-act play. The main action takes place on Wednesday, October 16. The events of the previous day and the day afterwards can then be regarded as prologue and epilogue, respectively. This view can be further supported by the fact that the first day covers only twelve pages and the last day, six.

The novel is also brief. As if he were writing a play, Salkey has managed to say everything in no more than one hundred and fourteen pages. Indeed this book can easily be adapted for production on the stage.

What I cannot understand is the publisher's insistence that *Joey Tyson* is a children's novel. Unlike Salkey's other children's novels *Drought* and *Riot*, there is very little here to interest a youngster. In a novel like Orwell's *Animal Farm* the technique of allegory creates an elementary level at which even a child can enjoy and, in his own way, understand the events of the story. This is not so here. Anyone who comes to this novel expecting a children's story will be disappointed, but for one with a passion for serious ideas well expressed in a simple, direct style, *Joey Tyson* will prove rewarding and satisfying.

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