

The Penalty that Natasha must Pay (Ameen Akhalwaya)

Rand Daily Mail • August 14, 1981



Zubeida "Juby" Mayet

Natasha Mayet is a warm, sensitive, lovable little girl. She's everyone's pet, and well she might be. She has six brothers. She is the youngest member of her family – and one of only two girls.

During the recent school holidays, friendly neighbours took 10-year-old Natasha with them to Durban. Obviously, they wouldn't risk allowing her to go to the beach. Natasha says she is very grateful to her neighbours for taking her along. She wished, though, her mother had accompanied them. But she couldn't. Some people in powerful positions have decided she must remain in Lenasia, Johannesburg.

Natasha wants her mother to attend her school sports day along with other parents. Her mother cannot – not that she wouldn't want to ...She also wants her mother to go to her school concerts, just as any proud parent would do. Her mother would end up in jail if she went.

In fact, as would any concerned parent, her mother may want to discuss Natasha's progress with her teachers. Her mother may also want to join a parents' committee. She would face a jail sentence if she went into the school. Her mother can't even accompany Natasha to friends' homes to attend a birthday party.

Two weeks ago, Muslims celebrated Eid, the end of the month-long fast of Ramadan. Traditionally, it is a time for family and friends to get together, to visit the aged, the orphans, and the infirm. People visiting Natasha's home would have risked getting her mother into serious trouble. And her mother would also have been in serious trouble if she went to greet friends as the occasion calls for.

That is little Natasha's punishment, the penalty she has to pay for being the child of Juby Mayet, a widow, a qualified teacher, but better known as a pioneering journalist. Ms Mayet, 43, is banned. She has been put out of public circulation since December 1978 for five years at least. Does Natasha know what the banning means? "Yes," she replies, "my mummy can't go with her friends. She can't come to my school. She can't take me

to the bioscope.”

Does she know what her mummy is supposed to have done that brought about the banning? No, she says. Does she suspect her mummy might have done anything wrong? She thinks hard, then replies: No.

When policemen sometimes visit their home to check if her mummy is not breaking her banning order, does it worry her? No, says Natasha. “I am used to it.”

Recently, the Minister of Justice, Kobie Coetsee, withdrew the banning orders of 24 people. Juby Mayet’s name was not on the list. Just as those unbanned don’t know why they were banned in the first place – and then unbanned – Juby Mayet’s family and friends don’t know what she is supposed to have done.

They suspect that she was banned by the former Minister of Justice, JT Kruger, because she is a forthright, outspoken opponent of apartheid. Officially, she is banned because the government is satisfied she is involved in activities endangering or calculated to endanger the peace.

She was an executive member of the Union of Black Journalists, which was banned in 1977. Some of her close friends who helped found the union are now also silenced into the twilight world – Joe Thloloe, Phil Mtimkulu, Don Mattera, Bokwe Mafuna, and Charles Nqakula.

That Juby Mayet is outspoken there is no doubt. Long before the advent of women’s lib she had begun asserting her rights as a person. As one of a handful of black women journalists, she insisted on covering all sorts of stories, including those involving some notorious gangsters.

The more meek male journalists often had to seek shelter from her biting tongue, but they loved her all the same. She was – and still is – universally known as “Auntie”, after a popular children’s column she wrote for the old *Golden City Post* newspaper.

A few years ago she lost her husband in a motor accident.

But what was the crime that brought the wrath of the state down on her? In 1977 she was fined R50 for possessing a banned pamphlet. The following year, she and Mr Mtimkulu were acquitted of illegally withdrawing funds from the account of the Union of Black Journalists without the consent of the liquidator after the black consciousness body was banned.

A few months later, she was detained under the Internal Security Act, the “preventive” law which a cabinet minister said recently had been used to let a detainee “cool off”.

Her children celebrated Eid without her. What Juby Mayet was being “cooled off” from has still not been made public. She was held in detention for five months – and then, having presumably “cooled off”, banned. This meant she could no longer work as a

journalist. She was employed as deputy chief sub-editor of the black ecumenical newspaper, *The Voice*. Her employers have made several requests for permission for her to be allowed to work again as a journalist. Permission has been refused.

She is not allowed to teach, despite her qualification. Since her banning, Ms Mayet, in between long spells of unemployment, worked as a cleaning supervisor at a five-star hotel in Johannesburg. Now she works as a receptionist for a firm of attorneys.

Natasha and three of Ms Mayet's children are still at school, three are working, one is looking for a job. One of the sons is now married, and Ms Mayet recently became a grandmother for the first time.

The Mayet residence in a quiet street in Lenasia is a happy, lived-in, music- and laughter-filled home, filled with books. Raucous music from the teenagers' competing radios and turntables rend the air. The children's friends stream in and out of the house at all times of the day and night. Stray pets – dogs, cats, frogs, tortoises, rabbits – find their way into the Mayet home.

Juby Mayet is not a person to wallow in self-pity. She would probably be upset by an article such as this focusing attention on her plight and that of her children. She is essentially an extrovert, a gregarious person who enjoys being with people. A friend once said of her that Juby knew Soweto better – and had more friends in the township – than did most Sowetans. But banning is a form of imprisonment, and it must be frustrating and depressing for a person to be cut off from society.

Last year, Juby Mayet decided to attend a commemoration service in Lenasia in defiance of her banning order. Her presence in the hall soon brought the police in. Ms Mayet was charged, she pleaded guilty, and was given a three-month jail sentence, suspended for 18 months. She was taken to court for breaking her banning order, but she was never taken to court to have her banning order imposed.

Back to little Natasha. In two weeks' time she will be celebrating her 11th birthday. She says she would like to have a party and invite all her friends. But a party at home is a risky business. Her mummy could face the prospect of being jailed for breaking her banning order.