

## Meditations on All Broken Up and Dancing – A Meta Novel

Jim Morrison of The Doors wrote about an experience where he thought the souls of American Indians killed in an accident, which he witnessed as a child, enter him. A subsequent part of the song has these lyrics:

Enter again the sweet forest

Enter the hot dream

Come with us

Everything is broken up and dances

Directly or indirectly this song may have influenced Tan in his choice of words for the title when he wrote his first novel *All Broken Up and Dancing – A Meta Novel*. Tan's honors year thesis at the National University of Singapore was entitled *Modified in the Guts: The Influence of Mikhail Bakhtin on the study of modern literature*. Polyphony and carnival as we would see in Tan's work, are concepts he would constantly come back to. Polyphony, a term from classical music, as used by Russian literary critic Bakhtin, refers to the embodiment of many voices in a work rather than a single authorial voice. Carnival refers to an area of chaos where time, space and structure are suspended and where authority does not exist. Is there a connection between the disembodied Indian souls in Morrison's song and multiplicity of voices and the lack of a continuous time and spatial narration in Tan's novel? Morrison's fascination with Indian rituals recalling the dead does have a certain disruption of orderly time and space; further, the element of dancing is an integral part of carnival. Perhaps this novel can be regarded as an act of carnival and polyphony in which the writer and his characters struggle to bring forth something that has been misunderstood, under-promoted and yet which has achieved cult status with a legion of underground readers.

*All Broken Up and Dancing – A Meta Novel* written by Kelvin Tan, was published in 1991 by Thesaurus Media in a heavily edited form and without the subtitle *A Meta Novel*. The published version changed the novel's original paragraphing, deleted crucial segments of text, made changes to words and sentences that altered the novel's impact. The large and broad outlines were retained which accounted for its staying power nearly twenty years after it was first published. This is the first time the unpublished manuscript is presented to the public.

At its initial publication, the work received an initial double blow in terms of the above-mentioned editing, and secondly the print review. The editor of the first edition was obviously somewhat confused by the work. The official review was lukewarm, and the reviewer disparagingly called it an autobiographical work that every young writer needs to get out of the way. A third blow came in the way the book was distributed – it basically wasn't. Thesaurus Media lost interest in the book even before it was published, it didn't pay for the printing costs (which was paid for by Tan's father) and the

book was basically self-distributed. The book was slightly better redistributed around 1997 under the now defunct Simpleman Books. The relationship with Simpleman ended however that same year and nothing much else has been done since. The work has not been ostensibly promoted by academics (an important method of marketing), it hasn't been popular with institutions nor won any awards (another method to sell books), but for some reason, it has always sustained a strange rejuvenating life force all on its own.

Over the years, the book has found its way into the hands of many people, more often than not through the word of mouth. Some have picked up copies of it at the library, others have simply passed the book around to their friends and family, still others have found copies of it in second hand bookstores. Even now people still wonder up to Kelvin to talk about the book. Many, including those in the arts have privately acknowledged the impact of the work on them. A teacher mentioned that she found a dog-eared copy of the book when she was studying in Junior College and finished reading it at one seating. A blog mentioned that the book helped the person get through a difficult time in his life. This writer has also met several who acknowledged that the book has had an unexpectedly strong impact on them. In a country that measures success by commercial and other tangible factors, this work has stubbornly carved a space for itself by its veracity. This present publication is proof of it.

However, by and large, the popularity of the book has remained an underground phenomenon. Why? Perhaps it is more accepted to promote work that presents less of a conflict to people. A well-known filmmaker, for example, declared the work could never be made into a film despite obviously admiring it. At its initial publishing, a lecturer at a local university was so angered by what she perceived as the audacity of the novel, that she called Kelvin up early in the morning to declare to him what a piece of garbage he had written. Another 'award winning' writer would only privately acknowledge its influence on his writing. In adapting this work for secondary schools, this writer encountered views that viewed the work as being too 'subversive' or 'unnecessarily angst ridden'. It would seem that it presents something of a conflict for people. Perhaps because it does not fit into categories, it disturbs, maybe even evokes envy.

The one consistent group of people that has connected to the novel is the youth. If as Fitzgerald declared, one ought to write for the youth of his generation, the critics of the next and the schoolmaster of ever afterwards, *All Broken Up* has more than consistently fulfilled the first part of the requirement.

What is the reason for the strange life of this work? At one level the novel deals with the search for a sense of existential consciousness amidst the chaos of life. And it is probably this, which attracted many of its readers and challenged the others. The novel is almost a written code of existence, a 'how to' manual on navigating the bullshit that one encounters in the path towards self-realization. This is bound to offend some and delight others. The novel also has certain takes on the issues of pursuing an artistic path, as it traces the protagonist's struggles to be a writer in Singapore. Again many may have found sections of it offensive, as they would have mistakenly perceived it as a situation of 'if you're not with me you're against me'. Some on the other hand probably identified with it. It also has a broad swath of characters that populate the various strata in Singapore society, from struggling musicians, to

teachers and students in the education system, to the protagonist's Chinese speaking parents, to the rich and privileged, his army companions, all whom Brinsley Bivouac, the narrator, meet in his journey towards self consciousness. There is much to delight or find offensive in the depiction of these characters, as they are in a sense, archetypal Singaporeans that one encounters on a daily basis. One may even find oneself in the book in the process of reading.

A clue about the work can be gleaned from name of the protagonist. The character Brinsley Bivouac appears in a number of Kelvin's early plays and stories. One of the meanings of the word bivouac is a temporary army encampment. The character could then be seen as denoting a temporary phase in the writer's life, much in the sense of a journey that one needs to pass through. The first name Brinsley could have been taken from the 1970's British pub-rock group Brinsley Schwarz. That could be accounted for in the sense that it was through music that Brinsley first finds a sense of self. (please note that these and other readings were not corroborated by Kelvin). Kelvin is a musician as well as a writer; does this therefore make it an autobiographical novel? It is probably more complicated than that. Any writer would write from a variety of experiences and as a work of fiction, one would say that *All Broken Up* surpasses the simple facts of biography. If any of Tan's work is confessional, it would most likely be his early play *Tramps Like Us*<sup>[1]</sup> which had the subtitle 'a lowellian drama' thereby linking it to the confessional approach of writing. *All Broken Up* is a work of imagination that takes a leap off from a certain point in the writer's life. Kelvin was a writer, and had been for some years by the time he wrote *All Broken Up*, but not only that, he had already experimented with short stories and plays and had a deep understanding for art and writing. It is a work that marries the experience writer struggling to write something real in a country that prefers the ornamental and the superfluous, to his knowledge and the craft of writing. The reality of this struggle accounts for the heartfelt nature of Brinsley's conflict with a system steeped in conventionality. Tan had then studied at the National University of Singapore majoring in Literature and Philosophy while at the same time composing several plays, one of which won a third prize at the NUS Shell Short Play Competition in 1986. Although a local well-known theatre company offered to stage the plays and another invited him to participate in a writer's lab, Tan refused them and went on his own way. Having already seen through the façade and total incompatibility between art and competition, as well as rejecting patronage from with what he saw as inferior artists, Tan was on his way to carving an individual consciousness apart from the conventional definitions of success in Singapore and the pretenders and posers of the local arts scene. What also goes against the autobiographical argument is that many elements in Tan's life just do not corroborate with the protagonist Brinsley's life. Not to go into details, but for example the author and the protagonist come from extremely different backgrounds. Not that confessional writing is problematic. (which the reviewer thought it was) Eugene O'Neill's *Long day's Journey into Night* would probably have been condemned as an autobiographical play that every great playwright needed to get out of his system, or Dostoyevsky's *The House of the Dead* would have been slammed as unimaginative if these works had been reviewed by a like minded reviewer who reviewed *All Broken Up*. Indeed great work inevitably marries art and experience. Where one starts and the other begins is irrelevant, the point is that it should resonate with truth.

Art however is just one of many themes dealt with in the book and many who read and connect

to it are non-artists or those who do not aspire to be one. What is then, the reason for its enduring shelf life? The main reason could be that the book speaks to a multiplicity of experiences. The second reason is the intense sense of freedom, which many readers have felt, after reading the book. It is my opinion that this happens due to the manner in which Tan deals with the various themes in the novel, and the structure of the book. A first time reader may want to skip the remainder of this introduction and come back to it after finishing the novel as it contains spoilers.

In the novel friendship is a major theme. The protagonist Brinsley Bivouac goes through a series of friendships starting with Rama, and continuing with many others, they however fall by the wayside or take different paths from him eventually. This point is key in his creation of that great sense of individuality – that ultimately one had to rely on one's evaluation of one did, and that to a large extent the pursuit of the artistic ideal is an individual one, not reliant on affirmation from society, the approval of peers, or the companionship of friends, family and the understanding and support of 'relevant authorities'. To paraphrase what Brinsley's teacher told him: you can do what you want but don't expect everyone to understand you.

One of the most poignant scenes in the book is when Brinsley meets his old friend and hero Zuk, the guitar player who introduced him to music. Time had passed and his once upon a time idealistic and talented friend had resorted to playing in sleazy lounges for money, and when confronted by Brinsley, he mocked him for being unrealistic. Brinsley though feeling sad for his friend and angry at the same time, unsentimentally decided to move on, simply because different people chose different paths.

This unsentimentally is even more clearly shown in Brinsley's evaluation of a friend in Junior College, Jimmy D'Souza – 'that ultimately he is a shallow person and easily satisfied'. Brinsley recognized his friend for who he is, not without affection but also without the sentimental 'friends are forever' attitude. However Tan also recognizes that friendship is brought together by commonality of experience, as towards the end of the novel Jimmy and Brinsley are brought together once more by the break ups with their respective girlfriends.

The one constant friendship Brinsley shares in throughout the novel is his friendship with his Indian friend Rama. Brinsley meets him in primary school, however their paths diverge due to their different inclinations. Rama being the bright student goes to a top school and Brinsley is sent to a neighborhood school, and later on Rama pursues his law degree and career in England while Brinsley stays to pursue the elusive artistic ideal in Singapore. What Tan is perhaps saying about friendship and art is interesting because he seems to say that friendship can exist as long as it is built on a certain transparency and truth. Rama is the person that Brinsley tells everything to. He is often the voice of reason and moderation to Brinsley's outbursts and angst, and he remains a steady and loyal friend who reaches out to Brinsley even in his darkest moments. Rama is also the antithesis to Brinsley in the sense that he comes from a happy family and moves in the 'successful' echelons of society. He correctly points out Brinsley's inherent prejudice categorizing people into rich and poor after the latter expressed surprise that a friend could be so unhappy even though he was rich. And later Brinsley readily admitted

that he was being judgmental.

This side to Tan's description of friendship in the novels lays bare for us the idea that Tan sees in the possibility of people from different levels of society connecting based on a sincere intent to connect as people. Rama does not share Brinsley's concerns about art, neither does he share his family background and many of his views. In fact the conversations between Rama and Brinsley are some of the most fascinating exchanges where Rama constantly challenges Brinsley's views and analysis and ultimately provides a balance, which he lacks.

This ability or importance which the novel places on different people from different backgrounds connecting is especially brought out in the scenes between Brinsley and his Hokkien soldiers, whose highest education level was at the primary level. They hardly speak English; have gangland and blue-collar backgrounds. Throughout the novel, Tan emphasizes Brinsley's knack in connecting to people of diverse backgrounds, not in a romanticized manner but in seeing them as they are and accepting them for it.

The fact that Brinsley's best friend is an Indian is no accident, the problem of identity being one of the major themes of the book. It is best encapsulated in statements like "call me a nowhere man and you'd probably be right" or "I never really felt Chinese in anyway at all". As to origins of the name Brinsley Bivouac – "I renamed myself... because my original name sounded too green... I also renamed myself because my last name was Chinese". There is a constant usurping of tradition. For example Brinsley calls smoking and womanizing an aspect of Chinese culture that his father unconsciously left him. So too the traditional Chinese attitude of staying on in a relationship despite it not working -his mother stays with the father despite constant physical and mental abuse. Not for Tan the Joy Luck Club chop suey which some people find so exotic and interesting. There is nothing exotic about Tan's work. If anything, it's anti-exotic.

This search for an identity is divulged in Brinsley's search for artistic exemplars, which were almost all Western, like Jimmy Hendrix, and writers like Beckett and Joyce. At the same time there is a strongly anti-colonialist strain in his observations of Singapore's slavish worship of Western culture and his reasoning that he can only write in Singapore because he wanted to reach out to fellow torchbearers; his refusal to pack up and seek his fortune overseas.

This is reflected in the dialogic aspect of the work, which has been largely overlooked. The languages used in the novel veer from good English spoken by the more educated spectrum of the characters to the Singlish vernacular spoken by the others. No other writer in Singapore has such a command of integrating the vernacular into formal English and effectively creating art form. One who is familiar with his dramatic works can see this to a greater degree. In *All Broken Up*, the army sections are an especially good example of this. It is too this ability to embrace dialogue as a literary device, that gives the novel its polyphonic feel. Scenes of the various characters interacting, speaking and fighting with one another saturate the novel. The reality of the speech patterns pulls one in. Tan's ability to write realistic dialogue is something that has been totally overlooked. And it is very much related to

that search that Brinsley seeks, the 'nowhere' place of being stuck between the East and the West, the plight of being more articulate in Western culture than the people living there, yet having a deep sense of belonging and identity to the East but being accepted in neither place.

This identity that Brinsley seeks seems to be one that embraces and rejects at the same time what is Singaporean, as much as what is seen to be Eastern or Western culturally. For example there is the scornful observation by Brinsley that in Singapore "everybody is always anxious to be somebody, you had to be someone, a road sweeper, a lawyer etc". Yet there is the stubborn persistence that the character hangs on in struggling in Singapore despite constant rejection and the falling to the wayside of friends and family.

Brinsley's striving is intensely related to the physicality of existing in Singapore. This includes the hawker stores; Orchard Road, the people that populate Singapore, that anyone who has lived here would be familiar with. The articulation of that fondness comes through in Tan's description of 'my favorite wanton mee store', the HDB flats, the Centerpoint kids, the pillars of City Hall, the monotonous army landscape all male Singaporeans are used to. The novel is soaked in the physical landscape, much as our memories are tied in with the physicality of the place. And yet this is an ambivalent fondness, for it is also the same country that rejects him and his ideals.

In the book, the protagonist's search for identity is ultimately the search for an artistic identity. And in this search Brinsley is hampered and at the same time aided by that species of animal so potent to artistic expression – the female. A great part of the novel is devoted to the two main female characters in Brinsley's life – Melissa Lim, his girlfriend and his female friend, Brenda. In many senses, it could be argued that artistic existence is one that requires solitude, loneliness and self-reflection. Yet at the same time, being in a relationship, being in love is something that Brinsley goes through as much as anyone else. This constant tension between living a truly individual existence outside the norms of society and maintaining a 'normal' relationship is represented in the novel by Brinsley's relationship with Melissa Lim. This 'normality' is something that threatens to overwhelm Brinsley. Her 'normality' is also represented by her adherence to conventional notions of success and failure, gauges that ninety percent of people in Singapore are comfortable with no matter what they say. Not for Brinsley however, the romantic bohemian lifestyle of an artist to whom relationships are ephemeral but rather a commitment that is almost religious, in its faith and desire to make things work. When asked by Brenda why he still stayed with Melissa, Brinsley replied, as he did when he was asked why he stayed in Singapore – that 'he was committed.' And it is this commitment that enables him to reject the advances of the most attractive character in the novel, the intelligent, rich, privileged and beautiful screwed up that is Brenda Stefanie Chiong. The description of her when Brinsley first saw her is akin to any memory that a male would have of a truly beautiful woman - a sense of perfection that is strongly sexual, yet more than physical and to an extent, unknowable. Her physical perfection, her sensitive vulnerability and raw intelligence are the things that draw Brinsley. She in turn is attracted and confused by his idealism and talent.

Tan chooses to emphasize the myth like quality of the beauty and the protagonist's fascination with

her. In a sense, she is the only person who truly understands the extent of his artistic aspiration; Rama is his loyal friend but cannot understand the complexity of his artistic aspirations. Brenda, on the other hand has the intelligence, artistic inclination, warmth and complexities to fascinate any writer. If Melissa represents extreme normality, Brenda represents extreme dysfunctional and yet at the same time idealistic perfection and unconventionality, the extreme ends of human experience that fascinates Brinsley. Once Tan has built the myth of beauty, he breaks it down, in the series of incidents that follows Brenda's character development. She abuses her beauty and her body, she has everything and yet she has nothing. Beauty for her has become a curse rather than a blessing for she does not know who truly loves her. She falls in love with Brinsley because he sees her for who she truly is. Her friends represent that segment of privileged society that is rich, scornful and deeply lost. Tan lays bare the superficiality and terror of existing in this externally polished and happy façade, the world of endless social functions, parties and easy liaisons. Brenda's eventual suicide seems to indicate the ultimate incompatibility between idealistic delusion and the stress that the world places on beauty and perfection.

The feminine psyche is something that has always fascinated Tan and which he goes back and examines constantly starting from his early story Lola... warm[2], his one act plays, Life is An Angel[3] and Goodbye Jennifer[4]. In these stories and plays, the female protagonist is at varying times attractive, unknowing, yet manipulative, but also sensitive and caring at various times. The character of Brenda can be seen as the culmination of all these previous 'versions', although they are also fascinating characters in their own right. The fascination with such a character type is pushed in different directions in later works Flights Through Darkness[5] and the screenplay Within the Sorrow of Atoms[6]. This subject is also explored in his music as well.

The structure that ultimately holds these characters and themes together is the, to some fascinating and to others, confusing quality about the work - in which the writer speaks to the reader directly as well as through the events in the novel. This was the element that was deemphasized in the printed edition. What one might also miss is that the narration is at the same time a device and a struggle. A struggle between the author and his characters. Going back to the concepts of polyphony and carnival, I think it is this multiplicity of voices, this breakdown in structures of speech, writing, social strata, cultural and individual barriers that gives the reader a sense of freedom after reading it. Much in the manner that Bakhtin's medieval carnival gave the individual a space of freedom to be, this novel gives the reader a chance to be, in opening a space of carnival and polyphony where conflict between writer and protagonist, character and writer, protagonist and characters brings out. I don't think the structure simply exists as a device, but because there is a genuine struggle going on. In a manner of the word, the characters in the novel are running away from the author, they are simply saying what they want to say, like the disembodied voices of Morrison's Indians. They are beyond authorial control. As the title of the novel implies, everything is broken up and yet, dances.

All Broken Up is a deceptive novel, it is easy to think one has seen much of it, or think that one knows what it is about when it in fact is not. This essay simply gathers some thoughts that this writer has had in reading the work, and is in no way definitive. I would hope in time to come, those who are

much more able than me would be able to give this work its due.

In his writing on Bakhtin, Tan wrote “Bakhtin offers hope to the word where Derrida doesn’t.” One can say the same thing for Kelvin, and further, perhaps one can say that All Broken & Dancing – A Meta Novel offers the readers hope. And perhaps that’s why it is still around.

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1 Published in Prize Winning Plays (1987), first anthology of NUS Shell Short Play Competition winning plays. First performed in 1986. Subsequently, a workshopped version was performed in November 1997 by Aporia Society at The Chinese Opera Institute.

[2] Published in Expressions, The Straits Times, October 5, 1985

[3] Unpublished. First performed in October 1998 by Aporia Society at the 2nd Indian Theatre Olympiad, Orissa and at the Shanghai Experimental Theatre Festival and subsequently in November 1998, at The Chinese Opera Institute, Singapore.

[4] Unpublished and unperformed as of this time of writing.

[5] Unpublished. Presently being adapted into a feature film.

[6] Unpublished and unperformed.