

Business Standard

Finding forever

Since early modernity, popular representation of time is the one that drives capital and manufactures social life

Sayandeb Chowdhury June 09, 2017 Last Updated at 23:03 IST

In the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible, prophet Daniel sees “The Ancient of Days” as saving the world, after which “his dominion shall be *everlasting*; it shall *never* be destroyed”. This is one of the more prominent pronouncements in Hebrew literature of the pursuit of “*everlasting*” glory undertaken in *this* world as against, say, the immortality of gods in Greek, Nordic or Roman mythology. The Greek gospels of the New Testament continued with endless intimations of immortality. What is this seduction of living eternally? What are the fault lines? If time is forever, can it be chopped, cut, sliced and clocked? Can we travel in time, even in an imaginary world? Such questions have occupied scientists and artistes, philosophers and mavericks. And writers of course. Along with immaculate *eternity* in scriptures and eschatological texts, a secular idea of eternity has always impressed itself upon the finest of literature. In a story by Jorge Luis Borges, the ageing narrator, while sitting on a bench by the river on a lonely afternoon, meets a young boy, only to realise that the boy is none other than his younger self. The two *ages* of the same man continue to probe and reflect on the beauty and sadness of life, largely unperturbed. The premise is typically Borgesian and you are glued to the conversation when the *elder* man maps the future life to the *young* man. So far so good; till the young man asks his elder self — if you remember everything of your life, do you as a young man recollect meeting your older self? Alas, the older self could not remember ever having met his older self when he was the younger self! Borges ends it there, leaving us tantalisingly close to the vortex of an ever-*unfolding* time. This is not the mythical time of gods and angels, of the testaments and gospels. Borges’ time is slippery, anthropomorphic time.

Literature is full of this irony. The classics are often hailed as custodians of eternity — of being texts which do not die. But *in* those classics, the greatest of heroes perish, the mighty empires fall, an entire world is destroyed. In other words, literature that has survived time is almost unexceptionally about the irrevocable, omnipresent pull of death and decimation. In Homer’s *The Illiad*, Achilles is besotted with everlasting glory only to be killed by a shot of a mere arrow — exactly the same way as Krishna — a man of otherwise firm and inveterate intelligence — was killed in the Indian epic. In fact in the Mahabharata, none of the so-called greats live to tell the tale, except Aswathama, who is cursed with the most horrifying *eternal* life. Consider the New Testament. After pages and pages of the glory of the Jesus, one is bemused that neither the Son of Man nor his Kingdom of God on earth was immortal after all. The Nazareth-born Jewish carpenter was nailed to a cross before he turned 30 and in 30 more years his Kingdom of Judea was razed to the ground by the Roman Empire. From Homer to Hemingway (*From Here to Eternity*), from Achilles to James Bond (*Tomorrow Never Dies*), from H G Wells (*The Time Machine*) to Stanislaw Lem (*Solaris*), the idea of man’s search for glory beyond his own mortality has been one of the founding desires of literature. And yet, literature is full of scorn and suspicion for any proclamation of immortality. Shakespeare, for example, in his typically stoic disclosure shows obvious dereliction towards any idea of eternity usurping anthropomorphic time; something epitomised in Macbeth’s famous lines “*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow/ Creeps in this petty pace from day to day/ To the last syllable of recorded time;/ And all our yesterdays have lighted fools/ The way to dusty death*”. Scorn for immortality is at the heart of Goethe’s Doctor Faust and Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, two founding texts of western modernity. If literature at all hopes to *embody* eternity, it does so by carrying within it the unmistakable sense of an ending.

Since early modernity, *popular* representation of time is the one that drives capital and manufactures social life and holds together our apparent need for material productivity, industrial occupiability and technological mobility. This is clock time as we know it. But what can we call time in literature — time that hints at, seduces to, even promises but never guarantees immortality? Last month, Stephen Hawking, in a widely

published interview, said that human species must find a new planet within a hundred years, because the earth will become completely uninhabitable after that. With this declaration, Mr Hawking has put a number to the idea of forever and date to the concept of extinction. Have we then entered the last days of anthropomorphic time? Or have we been finally relieved of the illusion of eternity? Woody Allen once said “Eternity is a very long time, especially towards the end”. Perhaps he is right, after all.

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