

## Confluence of Minds: A Comparison of Nietzsche's and Shaw's 'Vision of a Better Mankind'

GS. Aravind\*

Research Associate

School of Social Science and Languages, VIT University, Vellore -632014, Tamil Nadu, India

Dr Laxmi Dhar Dwivedi

Associate Professor

Department of English , School of Social Science and languages, VIT University, Vellore -632014, Tamil Nadu  
India

### Abstract

Fredrick Nietzsche and George Bernard Shaw were not contemporaries. Though it is so, there are certain subtle connections between the philosophies put forward by them. Both of them were atheists and revolted against the moral conventions of their day. Their ideas were viewed as extreme in their times, as a result of which both the thinkers were deemed eccentric by the majority. In Nietzsche's case, his slip into a state of lunacy during the final years would have further strengthened the public opinion about him. In this paper, I would attempt to make a brief comparison of the philosophies of these great writers. In order to streamline from the wide gamut of ideas they have in their credit, the concepts of 'Ubermensch' (also called Overman) and 'Will to Power' put forward by Nietzsche will be compared with that of Shaw's ideas of 'Life Force' and 'Superman'. It is possible to make a connection between these two concepts and also their worldview in general so that one could find that Shaw's ideas are an extension of Nietzsche's but in a different way. In order to explicate the latter's ideas, his drama *Man and Superman* is analyzed with reference to his concepts.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, Shaw, Superman

### Introduction

Nietzsche, the German philosopher, holds high regard in the realm of Western philosophy and modern intellectual history. Martin Heidegger, Albert Camus, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Kazantakis, Bernard Shaw, Eugene O'Neill are just some of the major authors, to name a few, who were deeply influenced by his writings. During his lifetime, he never met with due respect his ideas deserved. He was miserable and lonely with an array of physical ailments. His philosophies were misinterpreted and manipulated (by his sister Elizabeth) to support the Nazi regime and Hitler. As a result of this, he was perceived as an anti-human thinker who supported race superiority and bloodshed whereas, in reality, he was all too human. He was a rebel to the core and dared to oppose the established canon of Christian doctrine, particularly in their belief in afterlife. To put it in the simplest terms, Nietzsche was a thinker who believed that this world is the ultimate reality. He disdained any stream of thought that denounced this reality, anything that failed to respect the pleasures and pains of this earthly life.

### The concept of 'Ubermensch'/'Overman'

Nietzsche develops the concept of 'Overman' in his book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-91), which is his only philosophical novel. In this book, he describes his understanding of the present state of man. According to him, man is living in a state of mediocrity and his state is pitiable. He always likes to frolic in the comfort zone, is afraid of differences and is almost convinced that his present life is something to be just survived and not lived. He shockingly realizes that people have lost all hope in this world and dreams of a better condition only in the next world, the afterlife that comes after death. They are conditioned that way by religion and societal norms. Nietzsche utterly despises this pessimistic way of thinking. He bemoans the plight of human condition so much that, he envisages the end of human race, 'the last man' on earth, who would inevitably come in the near future marking the death of human kind. He says that man is overly concerned with comforts, with wanting things easy and not questioning things too deeply. He describes him as petty and small. This state is alarming and would eventually bring about the 'last man on earth'.

Nietzsche dreams about a change from this present state of lifelessness and he initiates the harbinger of a new life in the form of a superman. This is the very foundation laid by him to challenge the ingrained notions of the society. He conceives this as an ideal, a goal for the whole of humanity as they must strive to become superman by shedding the mundane man. He says that, man is something to be overcome. The current state of humanity is a hub of weaknesses so much that, his condition is as sickening as much as a polluted stream. He urges that, the meaning of life comes only in striving for the excellence, in the evolution of man into superman.

“Verily, a polluted stream is man. One must actually be a sea to take in a polluted stream without becoming impure. Behold, I teach you the superman: he is this sea, in him can your great contempt go under.” (p52, *Nietzsche Within your Grasp*)

Man has so far been living on the values laid down by the society. He blindly followed them without even an iota of doubt regarding the veracity of these values. From time immemorial, religion has been the driving force for man. He has stopped thinking and this job is taken over by different religions. Nietzsche has always been very critical of this kind of religions and Christianity in particular. He argues that Christianity is against the very essence of life. The first bone of contention against Christianity is that it is anti-human because it preaches that man is essentially sinned and that he must have no hopes about this life. The only hope of humanity is in an afterlife and that comes only at a dear price of being subservient to God throughout the whole life. Nietzsche ridicules this as a master slave relationship. Thus, he insists on a man who is free of all these fears and conventions. Superman is that ideal which must overcome such countless fears and restrictions that society and religion has imposed upon him and must strive for supreme self mastery. He must constantly fine tune himself to be better. He must not be a follower of values nor must yearn for happiness and comfort alone. He must make his own values according to what his instincts hint him and follow them rather than following the rules formulated by the so called God himself. He creates his own good and evil based on what helps him realize his true potential. That which helps him in this endeavour ultimately becomes good and that which does not help is bad. He must also embrace life in its entirety be it pain, agony, happiness or tranquility. He must recognize his power to create and this striving for excellence would ultimately bring meaning to our life. Last but not the least, he must accept change and see himself and his values in the same light and acknowledge the fact that nothing is permanent. The present aspects must be replaced by something stronger and better, sometimes by him or by some others. Hence is the necessity of continuously wanting to revamp oneself to catch up with the times. The superman hence becomes the ideal of someone who has mastered the act of overcoming himself. By following the example of superman, man and society can improve but not by assuming him as the leader but a goal that each one has to follow.

### **The Concept of Will to Power**

‘Will to Power’ is another concept of Nietzsche that appears in the book *Beyond Good and Evil*(1886). There is an established notion that self- preservation is man’s driving force but according to Nietzsche, it is the will to power. He says that every living being seeks to discharge its strength and this by itself becomes will to power. In other words, life itself is will to power whereas self preservation is just one of the immediate results. As Nietzsche says in *Beyond Good and Evil*,

“life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation.” (p65, *Nietzsche within your Grasp*)

Every individual has a will – to strive to grow, to spread, to succeed and to become predominant. This does not stem from any ideals of morality or immorality but simply because life is an exercise of this will to power. This will can manifest itself in many ways as in physical dominance and violence but Nietzsche is interested in a more refined use of the will to power, where the enormous potential of the will is turned inward to strive for self mastery rather than mastery over others. On a deeper level, the will to power is associated with his concept that nothing in this world is permanent, that everything is subject to change. The will to power is this instrument of change. Each being burns this will as a fuel to strive towards perfection, to make them into a superman and to overcome man.

### **The concept of Superman**

Superman according to Shaw is the future of mankind. It is a being of far more superior intellect which is born to replace the feverish and selfish humankind of today. The concept of superman is developed in his play *Man and Superman* (1903). According to Shaw, man’s philosophical progression has been minimal at its best. Man has been evolving in many other ways, for instance, his ability to alter agriculture, microscopic organisms and many material advancements; in short, his attempts at changing mother nature to his advantage. If this is the case, why is it that man does not use his abilities to improve the mankind itself? Superman serves as an answer for this question and is a far more developed form of human being who has the virtues of a better intellect, cunningness and intuition, strength to defy the outdated moral code and dwells on self defined values and assumptions. The world has produced some such men who, though not precisely reflecting the characteristics of a superman would come very near to what Shaw envisaged even though they don’t satisfy exactly the same standards. Hence he calls them ‘casual supermen’. Julius Caesar, Napoleon Bonaparte and Oliver Cromwell are examples to that category but Shaw asserts that they all had their flaws, as a result of which they couldn’t excel. Since the world is filled with people who are mediocre, supermen who occasionally appear on the planet face with an insurmountable challenge and that reasons for their failure. What he dreams of is not more Caesars or Cromwells

but a new race of more mentally healthy and morally independent beings who would have the courage to take forth their philosophies.

The drama *Man and Superman* by Shaw showcases two characters similar to the concept of superman. Jack Tanner is the author of *The Revolutionist's Handbook* and is a person who is much ahead of his times. He has his own conception about the world around him, which is exceptionally unconventional. He supports free love and disdains the institution of marriage. This becomes evident when he congratulates a character from the drama named Violet, when she declares that she is pregnant but not married. Ramsden, another character from the drama calls Tanner an immoral being because he speaks against the existing morality code of the land. He in turn repudiates Ramsden and asks him to cultivate a little impudence and some heterodox opinions as well. A Superman, if it ever comes into existence, would be like Tanner who thinks differently and relies on his own intuitions. Tanner is indeed the character Shaw created to debunk what he considered Victorian smugness and hypocrisy and over romantic (unrealistic) spirit. He also tries to clear the conventional relationship between the two sexes, male and female, and brings out that it is the female who is in eternal pursuit of male and not vice versa. In fact, Tanner is created by Shaw to showcase the true moral sense.

Don Juan also becomes one of the characters in the play in the third act named *Don Juan in Hell* which is presented in the form of a dream of Jack Tanner. He also hints the readers about the spirit of a superman in his words – "I tell you that as long as I can conceive something better than myself I cannot be easy unless I am striving to bring it into existence or clearing the way for it. That is the law of my life." According to Shaw, this striving for excellence is the most fundamental trait of a superman.

### **The theory of Life Force**

Another interesting concept put forward by Shaw in his *Man and Superman* is the theory of Life Force. Until the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, it was believed that God is the responsible force behind evolution but Darwin replaced it by his theory of natural selection which posited that evolution happened by chance. Shaw rejects this notion of a mindless universe and says that there is an impersonal creative will at force that directs all living things towards its evolution. He believes that every organism changes because it constitutes a will to change. This will to change to better beings is what Shaw called Life Force.

Shaw's theory of 'Life Force' helps mankind in his evolution towards a better future but for which an essential prerequisite is that man and woman must act in cooperation with each other. According to Shaw, people are getting married for the wrong reasons. He urges that marriage should happen in such a way that one must partner with a mate who showcases strong mental and physical abilities so that it is likely to become beneficial in the pair's offspring. The concept of Life Force and Superman is associated with each other. In his opinion, man must subdue to the will of the life force which has its own mysterious ways and produce the offspring that adorns all the qualities of a superman and thus help in the creative evolution. Shaw also argues that Life Force is a vital force that strives to attain greater states of perfection and it does so in the process of a creative evolution. The evolution of superman is an outcome of this exertion of life force. According to Shaw, the prime mover in the life force is woman. To sum up, Shaw also adds that, mankind is in the process of an evolution through natural selection towards the making of a superman and he believes that in every culture it is the woman who is the pursuer and not the men, as is the general misconception. It is the woman who forces men to marry them and he exemplifies this, through his heroine Anna who is steadfastly convinced that she would marry only Jack Tanner. On the other hand, Jack is dead against the institution of marriage and is fully determined that, if at all he ever gets married, it would never be with Ann. At the end of the play, it so happens that situations force him to accept the proposal and even though he is sure to be not happy with her, he agrees for the marriage. This decision shows the heroic energy of Jack Tanner in his willingness to serve a higher force. He recognizes the existence of a world will (life force) which is older and superior to his own personal will and decides to abide by its cause. In the drama, Ann thus represents the Life Force and Jack Tanner exemplifies a true Superman.

### **The confluence of Ideas in the Vision of a Better World**

A reader could find in his experience of Nietzsche and Shaw that, there are many areas in which their minds coincide. It is in their very nature that they possess a questioning attitude towards everything. They don't accept anything for granted and exercises their thought in a realistic way to reach the bed rock of ideas. They were never at home with the society they were a part of and as a result, their ideas were always subject to controversy. What I have felt in my study is that, beneath these superficial similarities, there is a more subtle confluence of ideas running between them. This part is an effort to unearth those similarities.

1. A trait that characterizes Nietzsche is that he presents his deep philosophical ideas mostly in a funny way. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he insists that he would believe only in a dancing God which mirrors his style of presenting lofty ideas in a simple way. Shaw has adopted the same technique of presentation of ideas in his *Man and Superman*. He has dealt with serious discussions in the work but it is presented in comical way. He has thus aptly titled the drama, *A Comedy and a Philosophy*

2. Both Nietzsche and Shaw confirms about the mediocrity of man's existence. Nietzsche describes mankind as a "rope tied between beast and superman, a rope over an abyss". Shaw also thinks the same way in concluding that man's philosophical progression has been minimal at best. In short, the reason behind the birth of the concept of superman is the same for both – the mediocrity of human will.
3. Both Shaw and Nietzsche condemn man for being content in his state of despondency when he ought not be. Both the philosophers find that this lethargy is one of the fundamental reasons behind the downfall of human spirit.
4. Nietzsche and Shaw, once again coincide in the fact that they are atheists. Nietzsche is popular for his contempt in God and religion. He has always vehemently opposed all Gods who preach their followers to shed their hopes in earthly life and to focus on an afterlife. His statement that, he would believe only in a 'dancing God' underscores this idea. He castigates Christianity and criticizes it as retarding one's growth for manifold reasons. For instance, man is born out of sex but Christian principles defy flesh and don't encourage any discussions on it. He doesn't approve of any value systems preached by the church as well. Shaw also shows his allegiance with Nietzsche's atheist principles in his contempt of all moral values brought into existence by the church. Citing the example of Don Juan story, he states that what attracted people from the very beginning is not the moral story intended by its author but the daring spirit of Don Juan to question God and be His enemy.
5. Both Nietzsche and Shaw was influenced by Schopenhauer's philosophy of will in the work *The World as Will and Representation* in which he described will as something that constitutes the whole world, which is an "expandable, unknowable, purposeless energy and force"(p12, *Nietzsche Within your Grasp*). He was called a philosopher of pessimism because all his philosophies put forward an utterly pessimistic view of life. Nietzsche and Shaw derived their concept of 'will to power' and 'life force' from Schopenhauer but developed the idea by discarding the element of pessimism from it.
6. There are indeed similarities in the concept of Overman and Superman put forward by Nietzsche and Shaw. The concepts are similar in their striving for excellence and belief in change. They question and try to improve every facet of life and even question their current state to become something better. They believe in the practice of overcoming themselves. They are also similar in their attitude towards moral values and codes of behavior. They don't bluntly accept any value simply because it is ordained by God, rather, they create their own values by means of their own instinct. That which helps them to succeed becomes good and which hinders their growth are considered evil even if it be established social norms. Overman and Superman believes in one fundamental principle of change. They believe that the process of evolution will never end and that life is not static but dynamic.
7. The concept of 'will to power' and 'life force' is the same. They advocate that life is nothing but a will or an instinct. It continually questions itself and makes experiments in evolving. They are evolutionary powers. According to Nietzsche, the will to power creates a desire for self – mastery which leads to the making of a superman whereas Shaw calls the 'will to power' as 'life force' and 'Ubermeanch' as 'Superman'. These concepts are essentially the same.
8. Nevertheless, there is a notable difference between their concepts as well. Shaw's superman must satisfy two conditions – he becomes heroic in his ability to succumb to life force, in a mightier world than his personal will and also that his superman is born out of a selective breeding of men and women of good mental and physical health. Nietzsche's overman is but an ideal and he never proposes a physical method by which an overman can be engineered. If Nietzsche proposed a psychological evolution, Shaw focused more on a physical evolution. Thus one could conclude that though Nietzsche's and Shaw's ideas of a better human race have similar traits, it is never entirely the same.

## Conclusion

This paper attempts to make a comparison of Nietzsche and Shaw to unearth some similar traits in their philosophies. Special impetus is given to the concepts of 'Ubermeanch' and 'Will to Power' formulated by Nietzsche along with the concepts of 'Superman' and 'Life Force' propounded by Shaw. Upon a closer look, it becomes evident that Shaw has based his ideas upon Nietzsche but slightly modified the same. This is illustrated in the paper. Moreover, the paper also tries to posit that, the two writers share some similar backgrounds in the development of their thought. Their embrace of atheism, disbelief in the established social norms and conventional ways of looking at man-woman relationship also becomes part of the paper.

## Works Cited

Hara, O Shelly. *Nietzsche Within your Grasp*, New Jersey. Wiley Publishing Inc.2004.  
Hollingdale, R.J. *A Nietzsche Reader*. New York .Penguin Books. 2014

Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. New York. Cengage Publications. 2015  
<https://ccrma.stanford.edu/~pj97/Nietzsche.htm>. Online  
<http://plays.about.com/od/manandsuperman/a/supermanthemes.htm>. Online  
<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/m/man-and-superman/about-man-and-superman>. Online  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Bernard\\_Shaw](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Bernard_Shaw). Online