

---

## The Outlook: Journal of English Studies

Vol. 11, July 2020, pp. 42–56

ISSN: 2565-4748 (Print); ISSN: 2773-8124 (Online)

<http://www.ejournals.pncampus.edu.np/ejournals/outlook/>

---

### Bhishma as a Superman in *the Mahabharata*

Sabindra Raj Bhandari

Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, TU, Pokhara

*Corresponding Author:* Sabindra Raj Bhandari, Email: [bhandarisabindra@gmail.com](mailto:bhandarisabindra@gmail.com)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/ojes.v11i0.36315>

---

#### Abstract

*This article explores and interprets Bhishma, one of the great heroes in the classical epic the Mahabharata, from the perspective of superman that the great philosopher Nietzsche postulates in his great work Thus Spoke Zarathustra. The superman is one of the alluring concepts in the domain of entire philosophy. He has his own ideals, standards, and thus becomes the creator of his own self. Sacrificing himself for the morals and dignity, he becomes an emblem for the righteousness, truth, and virtues. He stands for the sake of justice and righteousness, and suffers to rise himself even beyond the dualities of the world. Nietzsche's superman is a man transcendent. Bhishma, in the great epic the Mahabharata, also establishes his own values. He suffers a lot, but does not surrender. As a superman, the more difficulties he faces, the more he fills himself with new vibrations and vitalism in his life. His great pledge and his self sacrifice for the truth really transform him into a superman. Therefore, the creative evolution of Bhishma mirrors the genuine ideals of the superman. This paper applies the qualitative approach, and attempts to add a new dimension while interpreting and exploring the ideations of superman in one of the great heroes from the longest epic the Mahabharata.*

**Keywords:** Bhishma's pledge, dynamism, self-sacrifice, superman, vitalism

---

#### Introduction

The present paper explores the attributes of superman in one of the decorated heroes, Bhishma, in the epic *the Mahabharata*. The dynamics of superman, projected by the great philosopher Nietzsche, endow with his own ideals, morals and standards. He creates his own destiny, and has the potentiality to take risk for the enhancement of humanity. He has dynamism even to sacrifice himself for the establishment of the

virtue, truth and justice. A superman challenges every problem and changes it in his favor. Similarly, Bhishma in *the Mahabharata* creates his own values and establishes himself as the epitome of righteousness, justice and morals. His great pledge becomes the symbol for the humanity, and his self sacrifice proves him a man transcendent which is another great ideal of superman. Thus, it is justifiable to explore the Bhishma's qualities, his deeds from the perspective of Nietzsche's fascinating concept of superman.

*The Mahabharata* is the largest epic in the world. The epic was composed originally in Sanskrit language and it runs "to one hundred thousand stanzas in verse, thus making it, the longest composition in the world: in sheer quantity eight times longer than *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together" (Narayan). It consists of eighteen parts which are called *parvas*. The Vyasa (sometimes known as Krishna Dwapayana) was the compiler of this great book. This great work intersects the lofty ideas with multidimensional perspectives. No single interpretation is final. Ganguly is right to say that "There are verses in the Mahabharata that are exceedingly difficult to construe" (ix). It is clear from the fact that the epic transcends time-space dimensions. The characters resemble not only to a single idea and concepts; rather they are projected in such a way that they reflect the total aspects of the world and its reality. In this regard, it is clear "Whatever is here about dharma, profit, pleasure, and release (from the cycle of death and rebirth) is also found elsewhere, but what is not here is not found nowhere else. . . (18.5.38)" (Doniger). The epic always demands the new interpretation according to the time and context. Therefore, it is a very justifiable act to interpret and explore the Bhishma from the perspectives of superman as projected by the philosopher Nietzsche.

### **Statement of Problem**

Researchers have analyzed and interpreted *the Mahabharata* from different perspectives. The epic possesses the lofty ideas and concepts which are expressed in powerful dialogues, events and the projection of the characters in such a way that they become popular and inspiring throughout the ages. Bhishma is one among the many heroes from the epic. However, the epic intensifies him in such a way that he creates his own values and norms. He fights for righteousness, and even sacrifices himself for the sake of his truth, virtue and justice. Nietzsche in the great book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* also projects the similar proclamations about the dignity and valor of superman. Thus, the present paper attempts to justify the following questions: What are the values, morals, and standards of superman and Bhishma? How do the ideals of Bhishma and superman meet? How does Bhishma become the real semblance of superman that Nietzsche projects in his philosophy?

## Objectives

The paper aims to interpret Bhishma in *the Mahabharata* from the modern philosophical perspective of superman because they both are men transcendent. It intends to crystallize how the attributes, qualities and standards of the superman projected in the Western philosophy by Nietzsche finds their exact explanations in Bhishma, the great character in the epic *the Mahabharata*.

## Review of Literature

*The Mahabharata* has always commanded felicitations from various scholars. It is because of the variegated, unique and multidimensional aspects of the subject matter that it incorporates. It amalgamates multiple shades of interpretations. Describing the greatness of the book, Doniger writes:

*The Mahabharata* is not confined to a text; the story is there to be picked up and found, salvaged as anonymous treasure from the ocean of story. It has been called “a work in progress, a literature that does not belong in a book.”

*The Mahabharata* (1.1.23) describes itself as unlimited in both time and space eternal and infinite: “Poets have told it before, and are telling it now, and well tell it again. What is here is also found elsewhere, but what is not here is found nowhere.”

These words from renowned Vedic scholar Doniger prove the status of this great book. If the book possesses the knowledge that represents throughout more every corner, then of course it projects the concepts of superman too.

Bhishma becomes the central character in the epic because “a very important place is given in *the Mahabharata* to Bhishma. In fact, a whole part of it called Bhishma Parva has been devoted to it” (Chander 46). He plays the pivotal role because he is the hero in totality—a perfectionist. He is not only a great unsurpassable warrior, but also a philosopher, a politician and well educated scholar. Carole Satyamurti writes:

Many retelling give rather scant attention to Bhishma’s teaching to Yudhisthira, centered on the subject of how to be a good ruler..... And like Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, to which it bears a striking resemblance, what Bhishma has to say about the ruler should operate, and what mistakes he should avoid has direct relevance today and should small not be treated in a perfunctory way.

If Bhishma has striking resemblance with the Prince of Machiavelli, then his greatness and valor obviously can make him the superman.

The incidents, concepts, dialogues and characters in *the Mahabharata* do not only resemble to one dimensional idea, rather they encompass the multidimensional aspects. Clarifying this idea, Carrigan jr. writes, “The Mahabharata is thus unlike Western epics because it is not fixed in time and space in a single written authoritative form—everyone who retells it makes it his or her own; all who read it enter into a

communal experience of living out various social roles and discovering the impact of those roles on self and other” (xii). It clearly presupposes the idea that the epic along with its themes does not limit within a narrow limitations, rather it intersects the versatility of the life and the world. In this sense too, Bhishma’s character cannot be delimited within a framework; rather it finds its value when the different perspectives conjoin Bhishma with different shades of interpretations.

### **Methodology**

The research paper applies the qualitative approach. Therefore, the epic becomes the primary source of concepts and phenomena. The dialogues, narrations and events related to Bhishma have been analyzed, explored, and interpreted from the ideals and attributes of the superman that the philosopher Nietzsche projects in his great book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The research paper makes the positive relation between the concept of superman and ideations Bhishma. Related reviews, online resources become the secondary sources to support the proposition of Bhishma as a superman while analyzing the argument.

### **Nietzsche and Superman**

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) proposes that the traditional philosophy went astray and did not relate with worthy affairs. His philosophy leads one to be true to the world. So, he labels the religious dogmas as “The slave morality” (Gaarder 45). He rejects the religious dogmas, realizing that the concept of God that these dogmas view is “one of the most corrupt concepts of God ever arrived at on earth because everything strong, brave, domineering and proud has been eliminated” (qtd. in Weber and Perry 570). The situation is pathetic for the modern man. He says, “Now this God has died! You higher men, this God was your greatest danger” (qtd. in Spinks 119). In this regard, orthodox dogmas are out of track, and this situation creates void, which is the cause of degeneration of the entire civilization.

To come out of this narrow tutelage, Nietzsche creates a concept of superman which is one of the alluring concepts in the history of philosophy. His great work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* brings this concept of superman on the foreground. Through the prophet Zarathustra, he brings an operation of the modern civilization as decent and absurd. Zarathustra describes the death of god and proposes a new man i.e. the superman. This man can liberate himself from the web of limitation of reason. The term superman (*Übermensch*, sometimes exemplified as Overman) “carries two meanings crucial to Nietzsche’s revaluation of values. ‘Über’ signifies ‘Over’ in the sense of height and self-transformation. It suggests the elevation of man kind’s highest self into experience of being that has no trace of moralism or the fiction of free will. It can also suggest ‘across or beyond’ . . .” (Spinks 120). For Nietzsche, the fundamental things that once provided value and meaning to human life, religion, culture, society

are fading. If every fundamental value is fading, then what comes next? To fulfill this gap, the idea of superman becomes meaningful and valuable for everyone, who creates its own values instead of having inherited by the ideas and source taken from others.

Nietzsche writes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

If you would go high, use your own legs. Do not let yourselves be carried up; do not sit on the backs and heads of others. But you mounted a horse? You are now riding quickly up to your goal? All right, my friend! But your same foot is sitting on the horse too. When you reach your goal, when you jump off your horse—on your very height, you higher man you will stumble. (290)

The superman should be more than just a human. He is the one who has the potentiality to take risk for the sake of humanity. He has the power to rise up amidst the problem and other setbacks. Thus, Nietzsche wishes to see superman who can transcend the limitation of the pseudo world. He will “recognize duties only to equals” (Russell 692), and is always down to earth by breaking the cycle of narrow limitation of the society.

The superman sees opportunities in difficulties and deals with the dangerous situation. He lives dangerously. He has his own values, norms and becomes the creator of his own self. He lives for the every moment with a meaning. Durant writes, “Perhaps the dominant mark of superman will be love of danger and strife, provided they have purpose; he will not seek safety first; he will leave happiness to the greatest number” (427). He seeks meaning in every action and events. To create himself making an evolution within into a new man remains as his sole goal.

For the superman, life is a will to power. This will to power signifies how human thinks, behaves, and acts in all circumstances. It is the base for the present and future. This will to power gives vitalism to superman. It is the power which helps him to change the situation in his favor. In this way, he overcomes every difficulty. Not he is born to be bounded by tradition and convention; rather builds up his own ideals. Because of this dynamism, Nietzsche’s superman holds the power to affect the courses of the history. By realizing the limitation and reality of the life, he would be able to face it easily. He thinks it is the past that determines the present. And in this way, he looks the past with total satisfaction. The superman becomes content with his life. He even appreciates the difficulties and challenges of life. In this context, Nietzsche clarifies “You creators, you higher man! Do not let yourself be gulled and beguiled!” (290). He lives each moment for moment’s sake, no matters however tough it may be, and thus sees softness in the toughness. Therefore, the moment that becomes beautiful for the superman affects the mind of others throughout time.

### **Bhishma’s Birth: A Great Co-incident for the Birth of Superman**

Nietzsche projects superman in such a way that this concept affects the course of history. His birth becomes a traditional aspect for the incidents that are to come

in the future. He, in this sense, is the trend setter, a path finder as Nietzsche projects: “Thus alone— thus alone, man grows to the height where lightning strikes and break him: lofty enough for lightning” (289). Bhishma, in *the Mahabharata*, took birth to establish his own values, own identity amidst the cry, problems, pathos, war, and even anarchy. His birth included some divine art and system, and so was his death too. He created his own destiny, even his death remained under his control. Therefore, his birth was a birth to affect the course of history and time.

Shantanu, the emperor of Hastinapur, dedicated himself for his subjects. During his rule, prosperity prevailed in his kingdom. He was fond of hunting. One day, while he was on the way, he met a beautiful maiden on the bank of river Ganga. Her beauty mesmerized him and fell in love with her. The girl was no else than the river goddess, Ganga. He appealed her to marry him, which she accepted with a condition. The condition was :

O king, I shall be your wife and obey your commands. But you must not interfere with me in anything I do, whether agreeable or disagreeable, nor shall you ever speak to me in an unkindly way. As long as you are gently and kind, I promise to live with you, but I shall leave you the moment that you interfere with me or speak a harsh word to me.” The king answered: “So be it” (Slavitt 12)

They got married, their life was going perfectly. “And Ganga, the goddess of the three realms—celestial, terrestrial and subterranean—having assumed a human form of superior complexion and endowed with celestials beauty lived as the wife of Shantanu” (Slavitt 12). The background of the birth for Bhishma remains as the something wonderful with some purpose that underlies the fact of Nietzsche’s superman because he comes in the world with some purpose. Bhishma’s birth also presupposes some noble purposes that might affect the course of the history of humanity.

After a year of their marriage, Ganga gave birth to a son. To his surprise, Ganga carried the baby son toward the river and threw it into the river, and returned back. Though he wanted to ask the question, he was bounded by his promise. In course of time, he consoled himself. However, it did not last long. After a year later, the same incident repeated, but he could not speak. Likewise, Ganga gave birth to seven sons, but threw them into the river each time. When they were expecting for the eighth child, Shantanu hoped this time, the course would not be the same. After the baby son was born, Ganga followed the same course. It was more than enough that Shantanu intervened her. He also asked her why she did so. She uttered some incidents were beyond the reach of terrestrial reach, but some divine purpose behind the birth of the superman, Bhishma:

“You want children? Now you have a child. I shall not destroy this one. But according to our agreement, my stay with you is at an end. I am Ganga, the

daughter of mountains. I am worshipped by the great sages. I have lived you so long to accomplish the purpose of the celestials. The eight illustrious vasus endowed with great energy, were condemned by Vasistha's curse to assume human forms. On earth besides you, there was no else to deserve the honor of begetting them. Nor was there any woman on earth except one like me, a celestial of human form, to become their mother. I assumed human form to bring them forth. You, too, having become the father of eight vasus, have acquired many regions of perennial bliss. It was also agreed between myself and vasus that I should free them from these human forms as soon as they were born. I have thus freed them from their curse. (Slavitt 13)

The eight demi gods were named as *asta vasus*. In fact, their greediness caused them to be cursed by sage Vashistha, while they were trying to steal a cow that the sage belonged. Among them, the eighth demi god named Prabhasa was able to steal the cow. It was the reason they were cursed to live on earth being human. However, after a long prayer the sage modified and decreased the power of cursed, saying that seven would live on the earth for a few moments, but the eighth one should pass his life on the Earth for long time. It was the reason that the seven sons of Shantanu were carried to river while the co-incident made the eighth one lived on the earth.

Ganga also clarified that Gods assigned her the task to bring them into the world and carry them from here to the world. She then told Shantanu that the baby needed her care and she returned him at the right time. After seven years, one day king was walking by the river bank, he noticed a handsome boy practicing archery. At the mean time, the river Goddess appeared to the king that the boy was his son. The boy was named Devavrata by his mother, but later on popularized as Bhishma as he possessed the qualities of the superman. Devavrata was a very dutiful virtuous and dutiful son. The background proved that Bhishma's Birth was a coincident for a birth of superman. He proved a man transcendent because he had to sacrifice his own pleasure and earthly glories for the sake of human kind. He was born with some extraordinary purposes. He lived a life to give the meaning for the meaningless society. He became a name in the entire ethical system as a man of great valor, value, dignity and a firm decision that laid itself as solid transfusing an eternity as Nietzsche states, "Very well! Come on your higher men! Only now does the mountain of mankind's future labor" (qtd. in Spinks 19). He lived to be the pathfinder for the humanity, giving new values.

In *the Mahabharata*, Bhishma was born to establish his own footing. He lived just to give meaning for the society. He faced multiple challenges, without giving any chance to nullify his dignity. He followed exactly the parameter of the superman because Nietzsche inspired superman to "Be like the bird rushing out of his mountain caves; he wishes to dance his own pipe; the seas tremble and leap under his feet" (Nietzsche 295). The further life span showed how Bhishma trembled the seas and made them leap under his feet. He really held the superman(ish) qualities, remaining

as a milestone in his own essence for future generations as well.

### **Bhishma's Pledge: The Ideal of the Superman**

Bhishma life remained a more than just a human. He took risk for the enhancement of humanity. His dominant mark as a superman would be to face the danger. He did not follow number for the sake of truth. The incidents that were related to the kingdom, marriage and welfare determined his qualities of a superman.

After the river Goddess Ganga returned elder son to Shantanu, Devavrata also lived happily with his father. His fame was blossoming day by day. Once, his father, Shantanu, desired for hunting. In its course, he saw a beautiful girl named Satyawati. She was the daughter of fisherman. The king could not control his passions, so he decided to marry her. He narrated his proposal to her father, which he accepted, but with a strong condition "That her son and none other shall be your heir" (Slavitt 19). The king return to his kingdom Hastinapura, but remained deeply enchanted by the charismatic beauty of Satyawati. While on the other hand, he could not deprive his son Devavrata from his lawful right. He was trying his best to forget Satyawati, but the effects of passion were noticed by his son. When Devavrata asked about the reason of his tension, the king answered:

"You are my only son," he said. You are a worth of a hundred sons.

But the life is uncertain. And you know the saying—that he who has but one son has no son.

It is not that I wish to remarry. I trust you that you will live long and add luster to our dynasty. I know, too, that I still attain heaven for having fathered you.

But you are a great warrior, always ready for battle. And if I lose you, if you should die, what will become of our line? (Slavitt 19)

Devavrata, the superman, was intelligent. He pondered upon the underlying meaning of his unhappiness. He found out the reality and approached to the fisherman.

Devavrata possessed the qualities of superman here. Since a superman lives for others, and sacrifices himself for sake of other's happiness, it was a trifling task for Devavrata to sacrifice his own happiness for his father's sake. He himself became the epitome of morals and high standards as Nietzsche proclaims, "Take good care there, you higher men, for nothing today is more precious to me and rarer than honesty" (289). With these guiding principles, Devavrata then said to the father of Satyawati, which was the strongest pledge. This momentum of the greatest pledge ever made is often known as Bhishma's pledge. A super human's pledge it was! The pledge runs:

"Hear my vow, O fisherman never has there been and never shall be there be again one like it.

I make my vow that your daughter's son shall be again one like it. I make my vow that your daughter's son shall be our king."

The fisherman considered this. "I know you are a righteous man", he said. I

believe you will keep your bow. I don't doubt your word. But how do I know that your children will also keep your word and honor your promise? I speak as a father concerned for his daughter's welfare."

Gangadatta (The son of Ganga) replied: "Then hear me again, O fisherman I have already surrendered my claim to the throne. Now I give you further vow—that I shall never marry nor lie with a woman. You need not fear on account of any child of mine."

-----  
The fisherman was delighted, "I gave my daughter to the king," he said  
At that moment from heaven, the Apsaras and the gods and sages sent down on Gangadatta's head drain of flower as together they proclaimed:

"He shall be known henceforth as Bhishma, the maker of the awesome vow."

Bhishma beckoned to the fisherman's daughter. "Come, mother," he said, "ascend into my chariot. Together we shall go to the palace."

When Shantanu heard of Bhishma's vow, he was deeply moved. "I shall give you a gift," he said. "So long as you wish to live, death shall not touch you. You will die only when you wish to die." (Slavitt 20)

This wonderful pledge of Devavrata transferred him into Bhishma, the maker of the awesome vow. Then thereafter, he remained as a solid foundation for his vow wholeheartedly, serving the kingdom its subjects, and its rulers no matter whatever problems, difficulties and sorrow hurdled his path. He served the successors of Hastinapura though lawfully it belonged to him. No matter as unvanquished warrior he was, he never changed his determination in many crossroads throughout his life. As a Nietzsche's superman, he "did not learn how to surrender, you did not learn petty prudences . . . you higher men, overcome the small virtues, the small prudences, the grain- of- sand consideration the ant's ruffraff, the wretched contentment . . ." (Nietzsche 287-88). Only the superman projected by Nietzsche can remain a milestone in his determination in his vow because he was guided by the philosophy that *the Mahabharata* proclaimed: "It is better to flame forth for one instant than to smoke away for ages" (cited in Vivekandanda Institute of Human Excellence 180). Bhishma as a superman is a man transcendent who could live "across or beyond" man, proving the man of higher morals and values for the coming generation.

*The Mahabharata* qualifies how Bhishma stood by his own determination. He was ready to sacrifice his life, but not ready to go against his pledge. Satyawati gave birth to two sons namely Chitrangadha and Vichitravirya. After Shantanu, Chitrangadha became the king of the empire, but he died early. Then Vichitravirya ruled the Kingdom. According to his vow, Bhishma powered the throne humbly. When the king became young, Bhishma expressed that the king should get a young bride. At the meantime, Bhishma heard that the king of Kashi was going to organize the swayamvara, the ceremony where the bride would select the bridegroom of his

three daughters namely Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika. However, the bridegroom had to become victorious in the contest to win the hand of bride. Bhishma selected these three princesses for his king Vichitravirya. He participated in the program, and challenged all the monarchs who participated that program by standing the he was there to seize the three princesses on the behalf of his brother (king)Vichitravirya. The fight was so deadly “With the heavy downpour of missiles that it looked like the ancient encounter between the celestials and the Asuras, and men of courage who took no part in it were struck by fear even to witness the scene” (Slavitt 23). In this way, he won the princesses for his king. However, Amba disclosed the truth that she loved another king Salva. Bhishma returned her back to Salva who told her that Bhishma won her in the contest, so he (Salva) could not accept her. She requested Bhishma to accept her, but he was bound by his vow that he refused to marry her at any cost. However, he told sorry for her. This was the strongest determination of Bhishma.

Bhishma even invited further consequence in his life, but he faced them as a superman did. Amba became revengeful and roamed for the help, but nobody dared to help her because of the fear of Bhishma. Ultimately, she asked help from Parashurama, the teacher of Bhishma. Parashurama was so powerful the he was supposed to be the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, the lord of protection. Every person from a warrior caste trembled while hearing his name. Then the story itself revealed how determined Bhishma was in his vow, and he revealed his power of superman:

Parashurama was so shocked to hear Amba’s story that he immediately challenged his student to a duel. A terrible fight ensued which lasted for several days. Finally, Parashurama gave up. No one can defeat Bhisma. And no one can kill him unless he wants to die. ‘If this fight continues, both of us will release weapons that will destroy the world. So it has to stop,’ he said.

In despair, Amba then took a vow. She would not eat or sleep until the Devas revealed to her the means of killing Bhisma.

She stood on one foot of top of the hill for days until Shiva, the destructive form of God, appeared her ‘you will be the cause of Bhisma’s death,’ said Shiva, ‘But only in your next life.’ Determined to hasten Bhisma’s death, Amba killed herself by leaping into a pit of fire. She would be reborn in the household of Drupada, King of Pachala, as Shikandi, and fulfill her destiny as Bhisma’s nemesis. (Pattanaik)

The Gods even involved in the war with Bhishma. He got such a powerful vitalism from his strong determination. It signifies that time had to move according to his course. He traced the future and its history. Even the lord of destruction, lord Shiva, had to manage the time and could not help Amba because Bhishma was unsurpassable. So, he chose to become the semblance of superman as Nietzsche says, “And do not forget your legs either. Lift up your legs too, you good dancers; and better yet, stand on your head” (294). He danced his own. He made the time dance according to his

pose and tenets.

Vichitravirya after seven years of his marriage died childless. Then Hastinapura remained without a lawful heir. There was no option except Bhishma had to get married and handled that kingdom. His determination as a superman found its climax even at this time of great crisis. He never gave the chance to light off his morals and standard at this time as Nietzsche has stated that superman “do not let yourself be gulled and beguiled” (290). Bhishma remained on a solid foundation of his ethics and rules. Satyawati requested him to get married because “The Virtuous and celebrated Shantanu of Kuru’s race now depend on you; .....At my command, therefore, sire offspring on them for the perpetuation of our line” (Slavitt 15). For Satyawati, he made his vow, and she commanded him to get married, but he remained as solid as rock in his pledge. His strength, inner vitalism, and powerful dynamism came out in these powerful lines when he replied to Satyawati:

“O Satyawati, I repeat the pledge once I gave; I would renounce the three worlds, the empire of heaven, and anything greater than that, but I can never renounce truth. The earth may renounce its scent; water, its wetness; light, its power to show forms; air its attribute of touch, the sun, his glory; fire, its heat; the moon, his cooling rays; space its capacity of transmitting sound; the slayer of Vritra, his prowess; and the gods of justice, his impartiality. But I cannot renounce truth.”

To this Satyawati answered: “I know that your vow was on my account. But in this emergency, you bear the burden of the duty one owes one’s ancestors, O punisher of foes, act in such a way that the line may not be broken, and that our friend and relative may not grieve.” (Slavitt 25-26)

These wonderful lines prove that how strong and determined Bhishma was in his pledge. His will to power and determination was so dynamic that it became the path for his inner quest being the “productive force that constitutes every level of life” (Spinks 139). That’s why, Bhishma as a name was popular for the strong determination, morals, standard, values and vitalism of life. No matter whatever the situation was, Bhishma never let himself feel down and low. He labeled himself as a superman, a man that was beyond; a man transcendent from the earthly joy, who sacrificed himself for the establishment of truth.

### **Bhishma’s Self-Sacrifice for the Truth: The Evolution of the Real Superman**

Bhishma’s rejection to get married brought a problematic situation in Hastinapura. To continue that lineage, Satyawati went to her first son, Vyasa, to solve the problem. He was born out of premarital relationship between the great sage Parashara and Satyawati. Vyasa was a compiler of Veda and an ascetic. Satyawati requested him to make his son’s wives pregnant. So, Vyasa went to Amibika to

make physical relationship. She was so afraid and closed her eyes that the child she conceived was blind. The child was named as Dhritarashtra. Next, Vyasa went to Ambalika who was afraid of seeing Vyasa. She conceived a pale and weak son named Pandu. Later on Pandu became the king because his brother Dhritarashtra was blind. Because of some circumstances, Pandu died early. Then, Dhritarashtra had to handle the kingdom until and unless Pandu's son became mature enough. This was the reason that later on Dhritarashtra's son, Duryodhan, seized the kingdom from Pandu's son, Yudhishthira. Duryodhan followed many unfair practices. But according to the vow, Bhishma had to support him because he was obliged to do so. He knew Duryodhana was wrong, but he fought for him as a superhuman because superman never let the chance to degrade himself from his own on morals. Even though he knew Duryodhana was on the path of evil, he fought for him till the end as his pledge compelled him to do so. Only the superman could do this because "the dominant mark of the superman will be love of danger and strife, provided they have purpose; he will not seek safety first; he will leave happiness to the greatest number" (Durant 427). Bhishma loved a life of danger. He lived dangerously. This is the crux of the quality of superman that Bhishma revealed.

The situation became so complicated that the sons of Panda had to fight against Duryodhana for their rights. On the battlefield, Bhishma became the commander of army. The side of Duryodhana was unsurpassable until and unless Bhishma fought for them because he could live until he wished. Death could not touch him. However, virtue and truth were on the side of Pandu's sons. The truth was going to be suppressed. To make the virtue victorious, Bhishma then desired to sacrifice himself. What a spirit! Even Lord Krishna had to break his vow of not taking any arms in the war. It was because Bhishma was unbeatable with his glory of warrior ship and the boon of "wishful death" from his father. He sacrificed himself for the sake of virtue. He opened his way for the coming generations to establish law, justice and *Dharma*:

After divesting themselves of their armor, Yudhishthira and his brother, with Krishna, walked to Bhishma's tent. Bhishma received them lovingly, and with the greatest joy, asking them in what way he could serve them.

Yudhishthira said, "Grandfather, you know everything. You stand high on your chariot radiant as the sun. Today, your skill brought devastation to our troops. Tell me, how may we defeat you?"

"While I am alive," Said Bhishma, "you cannot obtain victory, so you should strike me down without delay and save yourselves days of useless carnage. This is what you must do. I will not fight in inauspicious circumstance, therefore I will not fight Shikhandin, for the reason that you know. Let Arjuna advance toward me, with Shikhandin in front of him. He may then attack me—I shall be defenseless. Then only then, your victory will be certain." (Satyamurti)

Shikhandin was Amba who had been reborn to take revenge against Bhishma for

humiliating her. Arjun was a great warrior, and Lord Krishna, the incarnated one, had to involve in the predestined plan to overcome Bhishma. Had not Bhishma opened the secrecy, and wished to sacrifice himself, the victory of virtue against vice was impossible in the great epic *the Mahabharata*. His sacrifice remains as the real semblance of renouncement because he rises above the level of pros and cons of the worldly affairs. The "true renouncement happens only when you do not feel that you are renouncing anything" (Osho 459). The self sacrifice is not the renouncement of action, but the renouncement in the true spirit of *Dharma*, law and cosmic order.

He wished to sacrifice himself. By losing himself, he made the path of *Dharma* or righteousness. *Dharma* is "a cosmic order, right, duty, religious law, social and religious observances handed down by tradition" (Panikkar 876). He danced his own according to the dance of cosmos. He had his own vitalism; own drive about the life as Nietzsche has projected about the ideals of superman: "You higher men, the worst about you is that all of you have not learned to dance as one must dance—dancing away over yourselves! What does it matter that you are failures? How much is still possible! So learn to laugh over yourselves! Lift up your hearts, you goal dancers, high, higher! And do not forget laughter" (Nietzsche 205-6). This idealism of superman really fit the spirit, valor and spirit of Bhishma as superman. Throughout his life, he danced accordingly to the music of his own *Dharma*, own ideals, morals and standards. His fall on the battlefield was his own wish; it was a self sacrifice for the sake of humanity. No doubt, he is a superman. The last idealism of his superman is wonderfully described in the epic:

He thought of the boon given by him by his father many years before: that he would not die except by his own decision—he would choose the moment of his death. Now, Bhishma thought the proper time for him to die had come. He heard the voices of celestials being—vasus, his brothers calling from above . . . . He toppled over, heading, to the ground, his head toward the east and, as he fell, the earth shook and everyone who saw him screamed, "Bhishma the invincible has fallen." Seeing him fall, the hearts of everyone lurched with him. His body did not touch earth but was suspended, as if on a bed, by his exoskeleton of arrows. . . .

A strange sound filled the battle field—the sound of stillness, of nothing happening. All stood motionless, having no appetite for battle now. (Satyamurti [www.http/pdfdrive.com](http://pdfdrive.com))

This is the fall of superman—a great sacrificial fall. His deliberate fall established the foundation for the truth and *Dharma* and renouncement. He lost the war to make the truth victorious. Only the higher attitudes of superman make it possible. These are the most wonderful, existential aspects of Bhishma as superman in the great epic *the Mahabharata*.

## **Conclusion**

Nietzsche's superman is one of the most fascinating concepts in the domain of entire philosophy. The superman has his own standards and will to power. He lives dangerously, and favors even the unfavorable situation to set them according to his parameters. The theoretical ideations of Nietzsche's supermen found their exact projection the Bhishma in the great epic *the Mahabharata*. This great warrior lived for his own morals. He made truth, righteousness, justice and *Dharma* as his own driving force. Despite many crossroads and upheavals of his life, he never felt low; rather he danced in his own song of ethics, morality and truth. His pledge remained as a symbol for the unbreakable promise in the realm of religious philosophy and literature. He is a superman because he renounced everything selflessly, knowing the power of true renunciation. He does not feel that he is renouncing because he rises beyond the dualities that run in this phenomenal world. As a superman, he was guided with positive vibration for the welfare of human kind. He never trespassed the law of *Dharma* or duty without craving for any specific desire. He was a man of totality. He lived a life that crossed the pair of duality. So, he remained as a perfect man of renouncement, and passed an examined life. No craving desire involved and affected in his actions. He was beyond such earthly parameters of gain and loss. Following the ideation of superman, he remained a man of equilibrium and a man of equanimity. His birth, the moment of great pledge, and the wonderful moment of his self sacrifice possessed the great mission for the sake of humanity. Thus, Bhishma, in the great epic *the Mahabharata* resembles the real spirit of superman as projected by the great philosopher Nietzsche.

## **Works Cited**

- Carrigan Jr., Henry L. Introduction. *Mahabharata*. By David. R. Slavitt. Northwestern UP, 2015, pp. xi-xiii.
- Chander. Kumar Jagdish. *The Essence of Mahabharata and Gita*. Om Shanti P, 2006.
- Doniger, Wendy. Foreword. *The Mahabharata, A Modern Retelling*. Translated by Carole Satyamurti W.W. Norton and Company, [http\ www.pdfdrive.com](http://www.pdfdrive.com). Accessed 3 March 2020.
- Durant, Will. *A Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers*. Pocket Books, 1961.
- Gaarder, Jostein. *Sophie's World, A Novel about the History of Philosophy*. Translated by Paulette Moller, Berkley Books, 1996.
- Ganguly, Kisari Mohan, translator. *The Mahabharata of Vyasa (English Prose Translation)*, [http\ www.pdfdrive.com](http://www.pdfdrive.com). Accessed 5 March 2020.
- Narayan, R. K. *The Mahabharata: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic*. The U of Chicago P, [http\www.pdfdrive.com](http://www.pdfdrive.com). Accessed 5 May 2020.

- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Translated by Walter Kaufman, Penguin, 1985.
- Osho. *Gita Darshan: Discourses on the Yoga of Sorrow and the Yoga of Knowledge*. Full Circle, 2012.
- Panikkar, Raimundo, editor. *The Vedic Experience Mantramanjari: An Anthology of the Vedas for Modern Man and Contemporary Celebration*. Motilal Banarsidass, 1994.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*. Penguin, <http://www.pdfdrive.com>. Accessed 15 April 2020.
- Russell, Bertrand. *History of Western Philosophy*. Routledge Classics, 2013.
- Satyamurti, Carole, translator. *The Mahabharata, A Modern Retelling*, <http://www.pdfdrive.com>. Accessed 5 March 2020.
- Slavitt, David R., editor and translator. *Mahabharata*. Northwestern UP, 2015.
- Spinks, Lee. *Friedrich Nietzsche*. Routledge, 2007.
- Vivekananda Institute of Human Excellence. *The Gita Darshanam*. Ramkrishna Math, 2011.
- Weber, Alfred, and Ralph Barton Perry. *History of Philosophy*. Translated by Frank Thilly, Surjeet Publications, 1997.