

Contemporary Superhuman Ideals: From Nietzsche and Harari to Bollywood and Gandhi

Amirali R. Davoudpour

Iranian Canon of Medicine and Law, Administrative Wing of Law and Healing Association, Iranian Watchdog of Medicine and Law, Tehran-Iran

Email of the corresponding author: davoudpour@canmedlaw.org

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Abstract

The concept of the "superhuman" has evolved through philosophical, literary, and popular culture lenses, finding its most dramatic representations in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and contemporary thinker Yuval Noah Harari. This paper explores the juxtaposition of Nietzsche's Übermensch and Harari's god-like future humans against the backdrop of cinematic heroes in Bollywood and Hollywood and the non-violent, moral figure of Mahatma Gandhi. The article delves into how these varied representations of superhumanity reflect different cultural and ethical values, particularly in the context of contemporary Indian politics and global conflicts such as the Israeli-Palestinian situation.

Keywords: Gandhi, Übermensch, Harari, Nietzsche, Homo Deus

Introduction

The concept of the superhuman, as envisioned by Nietzsche and later by Yuval Noah Harari, represents a being that transcends ordinary human limitations, either through sheer willpower or technological advancement. Nietzsche's Übermensch embodies a philosophical ideal of self-overcoming and moral revaluation, striving to create new values that go beyond conventional morality. In contrast, Harari's vision of future humans, enhanced by technology, suggests a literal transcendence of human limitations, where scientific and technological advancements enable a new form of god-like existence (Nietzsche, 1883; Harari, 2015).

This paper explores how these philosophical ideas contrast with the exaggerated depictions of heroism in Bollywood and Hollywood, as well as the moral fortitude exemplified by Mahatma Gandhi. These differing conceptions of superhumanity expose deep cultural and ethical divides, particularly when applied to contemporary issues like India's political stance and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Unlike Harari's vision, which emphasizes the role of science, real-world conflicts such as those in Gaza reveal a stark separation between scientific merit, wisdom, intellect, and moral considerations (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024a,b). In these conflicts, a war between technological prowess and moral principles unfolds, where an excessive military budget is deployed against a relatively less developed but religiously motivated nation (Davoudpour, A.R., 2004c). This situation underscores the tension between scientific advancement and ethical responsibility, raising questions about whether technological superiority truly equates to moral progress or the application of wisdom. This also prompts inquiries into the authenticity of science when divorced from capitalistic means, i.e., money (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024d,e).

Real human conflicts present a contest between philosophical viewpoints and challenges to the evolution of human perspectives (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024f,g). These challenges are crucial for humanity to reassess its observational and empirical approaches to the future, though, unfortunately, not everyone succeeds in passing these critical tests.

Nietzsche's Übermensch and Harari's God-like Humans

Friedrich Nietzsche introduced the concept of the Übermensch (Overman or Superman) in his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche's Übermensch is not bound by conventional morality; instead, he creates his own values and rises above the mediocrity of the masses. This superhuman is characterized by a will to power, the ability to impose his will on the world, and the courage to embrace life's challenges without the comfort of traditional religious or moral frameworks (Nietzsche, 1883).

Yuval Noah Harari, on the other hand, envisions a future where humans, through advancements in technology and biology, could become god-like beings. Harari's "Homo Deus" represents a new kind of superhuman, one that surpasses biological limitations through artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and other forms of enhancement (Harari, 2015). Unlike Nietzsche's philosophical ideal, Harari's vision is rooted in the potential for scientific and technological evolution to redefine what it means to be human.

Bollywood's Cinematic Heroes: A Cultural Interpretation of Superhumanity

Bollywood's portrayal of heroes can be seen as a cultural interpretation of the superhuman ideal. These heroes, who can catch arrows with their teeth and perform impossible feats, reflect a desire for larger-than-life figures who can overcome any obstacle. However, this representation is more fantasy than philosophical ideal, focusing on physical invincibility rather than moral or intellectual superiority. These characters are adored by audiences for their ability to defy the laws of nature, symbolizing a wish-fulfillment that aligns more with Nietzsche's idea of transcending the ordinary, albeit in a more literal and less profound manner.

In contrast to both Nietzsche's and Harari's superhumans, Bollywood heroes embody a superficial form of greatness that is rooted in physical strength and cinematic spectacle. They are symbols of resilience and power but lack the deeper philosophical or ethical dimensions that characterize Nietzsche's Übermensch or Harari's technologically enhanced future beings.

Hollywood's Interpretation of Superhumanity: A Comparative Analysis

Hollywood, like Bollywood, has its own tradition of depicting superhuman figures, often through the lens of superheroes in blockbuster films. Characters such as Superman, Batman, and the Avengers epitomize the Western cultural interpretation of the superhuman. These figures, much like their Bollywood counterparts, are portrayed with extraordinary abilities that allow them to combat evil and protect humanity. However, Hollywood's approach to the superhuman often incorporates a deeper exploration of moral dilemmas, identity crises, and the responsibilities that come with great power (Burke, 2015).

Unlike Bollywood's often straightforward portrayal of physical invincibility, Hollywood's superheroes are frequently depicted as struggling with the ethical implications of their powers. For example, in *Man of Steel* (2013), Superman wrestles with the moral responsibility of using his powers for the greater good, reflecting a tension between Nietzschean self-assertion and a more altruistic, self-sacrificial ideal (McGowan, 2013). This mirrors Harari's discussions on the ethical challenges posed by future technologies, where the enhancement of human capabilities could lead to new forms of inequality and moral conflict (Harari, 2015).

Moreover, Hollywood films often delve into the consequences of unchecked power, as seen in *The Dark Knight* (2008), where Batman confronts the chaos unleashed by his vigilante justice. This reflects a cautionary stance on the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, suggesting that the pursuit of power without moral consideration can lead to devastating outcomes (Jest, 2008).

In comparison to Gandhi's moral superhumanity, Hollywood's heroes often find themselves navigating a complex landscape of ethical choices, where the line between heroism and tyranny can become blurred. This nuanced portrayal adds a layer of depth to the superhuman ideal, highlighting the potential dangers of power divorced from ethical grounding. Gandhi's approach, rooted in non-violence and ethical consistency, contrasts sharply with Hollywood's depiction of the superhuman, suggesting that true heroism may require not just extraordinary abilities but also a steadfast commitment to moral principles (Nanda, 1989).

This comparative analysis of Hollywood, Bollywood, and Gandhi's legacy underscores the diverse ways in which cultures interpret the idea of the superhuman. While Hollywood and Bollywood celebrate physical prowess and the ability to overcome insurmountable odds, Gandhi's life and philosophy remind us that the greatest superhuman qualities might be found in humility, compassion, and unwavering ethical commitment.

Gandhi's Non-Violence: A Different Kind of Superhuman

Mahatma Gandhi's as a living model for superhuman achievements during his lifetime had a different approach to life which presents a stark contrast to the superhuman ideals of Nietzsche and Harari. Gandhi, with his frail physique and commitment to non-violence, represents a form of moral superhumanity that is grounded in ethical principles rather than physical or technological superiority. His leadership in India's independence movement was marked by his unwavering belief in Ahimsa (non-violence) and Satyagraha (truth-force), concepts that emphasize moral courage over brute strength (Nanda, 1989).

Gandhi's correspondence with Adolf Hitler, in which he urged the dictator to embrace non-violence, is a powerful example of his belief in the superiority of moral force over physical power (Gandhi, 1939). In this sense, Gandhi's superhumanity is defined not by his ability to dominate others, as in Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, nor by transcending human limitations through technology, as in Harari's *Homo Deus*, but by his capacity for compassion, humility, and ethical consistency.

Contemporary Indian Politics and the Legacy of Superhuman Ideals

The contrast between these different superhuman ideals becomes particularly relevant in the context of contemporary Indian politics. Certain factions in India have supported violent state actions, such as those by Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which seems to align more with a Nietzschean will to power than with Gandhi's principles of non-violence (Varshney, 2021). This support reflects a departure from Gandhi's legacy and a move towards a more aggressive, power-centric worldview.

Moreover, the notion of the superhuman in Bollywood, which is rooted in fantasy, contrasts sharply with the real-world implications of supporting state violence. While cinematic heroes emerge unscathed from battles, real-life conflicts result in significant human suffering, particularly for vulnerable populations like children in Palestine (Said, 1979). This dichotomy highlights the ethical challenges of reconciling the ideal of the superhuman with the realities of political and military power.

Conclusion

The exploration of superhuman ideals from Nietzsche to Harari, and their manifestation in Cinema and Gandhi's life, reveals a spectrum of interpretations that reflect different cultural, philosophical, and ethical values. Nietzsche's Übermensch and Harari's god-like humans represent different forms of transcendence—philosophical and technological—while Cinematic heroes offer a more superficial, though culturally significant, interpretation. Gandhi's approach, however, stands as a reminder that true greatness may lie not in the transcendence of physical limitations but in the moral courage to uphold justice and non-violence. As contemporary global conflicts present continues to grapple with these conflicting ideals, the need to revisit and re-evaluate the true nature of heroism and superhumanity becomes increasingly important.

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