# Friedrich Nietzsche's Superman and its Implications for Political Participation in Africa

**Samuel Otu Ishaya (Ph.D)**
**Department Of Philosophy**
**University Of Uyo.**
**Email:** samuelishaya@uniuyo.edu.ng
 **&**
**Eti-enoabasi Gabriel Nyong**
**PostGraduate Student**
**Department Of Philosophy**
**University Of Uyo**
**Email : etiblagralph@gmail.com**

## Abstract

This paper is an evaluation of Friedrich Nietzsche's Superman and its implications for political participation in Africa. The superman of Nietzsche symbolizes the realization of one's complete ability, independence, and creativity. It is a declaration of human freedom and emancipation from the tyranny of religion and moral absolutism. The superman represents the capacity to change the world while maintaining one's independence, potential, and ingenuity. However, due to the complexity of the metaphor and the lack of definition from its author, the superman has divergent interpretations, abundant discussion and controversy. This has led to misconceptions and misinterpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy of the superman and as a result has attracted lots of criticisms. However, this paper focuses its attention on analyzing the negatives while extracting the positives from Nietzsche's superman and applying it as a tool for solving the problem of apathy in political participation especially in Africa, where there seem to be low political participation. This seeming lack of interest in politics adds to poor governance, bad policy enactments, and leadership crisis, which in turn stunts the development of the continent. This paper critically evaluates the implication of Nietzsche' Superman, vis-a-vis the problem of political participation in Africa. In order to achieve its stated objective, the paper adopted the methods of exposition and critical analysis. The research concludes that although Nietzsche's notion of the superman may have varied interpretations, adopting the virtues inherent in it can greatly help in solving the problem of apathy in political participation in Africa.

**Keywords**: Superman, Political Participation, apathy, politics

## Introduction

**N**ations progress by the systematic decisions of its leadership. This is why care should be taken in the selection or election process in order to have the right caliber of persons in power.  Sadly, Africa as a continent seem to have been unlucky with the selection process of its leaders, which has caused the progress of the continent to be sluggish when compared to other continents like Europe and Asia. The,  reason for this may be attributed to the case of seeming apathy or non-participation of the citizens especially the youths, in the political processes of their countries.  For example in Nigeria, record shows that for more than two decades, two political parties have dominated the political scene. However, during the 2023 general elections a little known political party - the Labour Party, made a significant impact in the elections because some youths showed kin interest in the elections. And as a result, they won different seats, including state house of Assembly seats, Federal House of Representatives seats, Senate  and governorship elections. This shows a clear indication of the might of political participation of citizens when there is a desire for change for the progress of the society. Friedrich Nietzsche developed the notion of the Superman to describe the progressive nature of societies that embrace the virtues of courage and resilient attitude to challenge and overcome the status-quo.

## Nietzsche's concept of the superman

Nietzsche's concept of the superman is discussed in one of his books: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which he describes as "a book for all and none" (Nietzsche iii). The superman is the theme of the first speech in Zarathustra's prologue, which he presents to the crowd that had gathered to hear him.  Nietzsche presents the superman or overman as a possessive man; a being with courage to challenge the status-quo and effect positive changes against odds that may stand in his way. The theory of the superman would be an allegory which possesses truth and determines what it is, in so far as it enables the higher type of man to develop his full potentials. It is the affirmation of life - saying 'yes to life', and not 'no to life's challenges' (Ojimba and Anthony 18).

Nietzsche used the image of the 'superman' to represent an ideal person who will liberate and transform humanity from religion and moral (slave morality) influence and exert master morality; this is

what he called transvaluation of values (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra 35*). The superman symbolizes humanity's highest tenet of progress. It represents the recognition of man's complete ability and creativity. Nietzsche proposes the concept of the superman as a critique of religion, morality, and the modernity crisis, as well as a solution to the social problems of his time -  the period of enlightenment; this period was characterized by the belief in scientific progress, achieved through the application of reason, rejection of religious beliefs, and traditional morality. Morality and religion were heavily criticized during this period.

It is essential to observe that Nietzsche's superman is an ideal postulation rather than a personality that would emerge from the practical implementation of his theory in everyday life. Nietzsche supports egoism and rugged individualism over embracing social impulse as a guide to behaviour (Babich 4). It symbolizes the capacity to change the world while maintaining one's independence, potential, and ingenuity. However, the superman can only achieve this by vehemently rejecting current moral and religious principles, which have been largely ignored by contemporary society. According to Nietzsche, Christianity focused on the God-man, but since 'God is dead', he must be supplanted by the man-god. The Superhuman is the heroic man who unites the beauty and strength of the beast with cerebral powers, which will allow him to overcome himself, the people, the world, and even destiny", (Nietzsche cited in Roubiczek 32). The superman, for Nietzsche is "the master of the earth" fulfilling the earth's purpose. In other words, he is a lawgiver, a law interpreter, and a ruler of the world - a man-god (*Zarathustra,* 6).

According to Nietzsche in his *Will to Power (*205), "the Christian morality," which he calls the "herd morality", had confused the modern man, who has disguised himself in morality. It was his conviction that Christian morality and religion have enfeebled man, striping him of his freedom, potentialities and creativity and thereby making it difficult for the emergence of a higher humanity - the superman. God, which occupies the highest hierarchy in religion, according to Nietzsche's thinking, represents the supra-sensory world in general. God is the name for the realm of ideas and ideals. Therefore, God needs to die for man to be free. The death of God declared by Nietzsche implies that there is no external being that superintends the activity of man, but man alone. We dare not leave matters in the hands of God again; for we have now become our own gods and as such, we are responsible for our choices and actions. As Nietzsche declare:

> Before, God! But now, this God has died. You higher men, this God was your greatest danger. It is

only since he lies in his tomb that you have been resurrected. Only now the great noon comes; only now the higher man becomes - ruler. You higher men! Only now is the mountain of man's future in labour. God died: now we want the overman to live (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* 323).

From the assertion above, it could be deduced that Nietzsche believes that the supra-sensory world, which represents the Christian interpretation of reality from which God formerly exercised influence and power over its adherents has prevented man from exercising and developing his potentialities, creativity and power. With the assumed death of God, man will now have the platform to develop and exercise his potentials in every facet of human endeavour including politics. Religion seem to create apathy among its adherents in political participation; they see politics as belonging to the irreligious. But should this be the case in our contemporary world, especially in developing countries including Africa?

**The Notion of Political participation**
Political participation encompasses a wide variety of activities in which people form and share their views about the world and how it is ruled, as well as attempt to influence and shape choices that impact their lives. These activities range from developing an individual or family's thinking about disability or other social issues, joining disabled people's organizations or other groups and organizations, and campaigning at the local, regional, or national level, to the process of formal politics, such as voting, joining a political party, or standing for elections. Intellectuals like Aristotle, Rousseau and J. S. Mill, aver that "a person attains his full stature as a rational, responsible moral being only through political participation" (Benn 1).

Political participation has been defined as "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take" (Verba & Nie, 2). For Arstein (16), political participation is "a categorical term for citizen power or all activities aiming to influence existing power structures". Discussions about political participation and civic engagement indicate that participation seems to be increasingly focused "on problem solving and helping others" (Zukin et al. 7).

Civic engagement may be defined as "any activity, individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity" (Macedo et al. 6). Citizens' actions influencing politics can be loosely defined as political involvement. Politicians and academics have

emphasized the unique character of democracy by stressing the role of regular people in political matters since Pericle's renowned burial address (van Deth). Political participation concerns government, politics, or the state in broad senses.

Various types of political behaviour that meets these criteria can be easily identified for example, casting a vote, signing a petition, or filing an objection are plain examples of specific forms of political participation. By increasing the level of abstraction, participation can be understood as a latent concept covering more than one form of participation as specific manifestations. Several forms of participation and sharing some basic feature are called a mode or type of participation. For instance, voting and party activities can be depicted together as an electoral mode of participation. A repertoire of political participation unites all available forms and all modes of participation (Tilly, 41-48).

As a consequence there is a profusion of self-actualizing, digitally mediated do-it-yourself politics; almost everybody can choose to be politically active about anything at any moment in time. In this way, the recent expansions of the repertoire of political participation differ clearly from previous engagements. By now, almost every conceivable non-private activity can be understood as a form of political participation when a political context is evident or political goals are manifest. It should therefore be noted that political participation also connotes responsibility taking. The depiction of political participation as "responsibility taking" underlines the ethical and moral connotations attached to them (Stolle and Michele 34-35).

## Political participation in Africa

A study carried out by Kris Inman and Josephine Andrews (1-35), on "Corruption and Political Participation in Africa: Evidence from Survey and Experimental Research," reveals that in Senegal, as in other emerging African democracies, corruption remains rampant. Corruption then becomes a hindrance to effective political participation. According to them, corruption has a particularly strong effect when economic conditions are poor (I25). While nearly all scholars on African political economy acknowledge the profound impact of widespread corruption on politics, there is disagreement on the role which the average citizens play to sustain the system. According to Inman and Josephine, perceptions of corruption in Africa increase the likelihood of both voting and protesting. In other words, citizens respond to corruption by turning out to vote in protest, which indicates that they are acting as citizens in spite of their lack of skills and resources. In another study carried out by Danielle Resnick and Daniela Casale entitled "The Political Participation of Africa's Youth

Turnout, Partisanship, and Protest", the authors find that Africa's youths, particularly those in urban areas, operate in broadly similar ways to their counterparts in other regions of the world. In comparison with their older compatriots, the youth vote less and are more likely to demonstrate no partisanship or an attachment to opposition parties rather than any affinity to incumbent parties. Yet, the likelihood of their involvement in protests is not significantly different from that of their older counterparts. This suggests while they are less engaged in elections and party politics. They are not necessarily channeling their discontent into extra-institutional modes of participation in large proportions. Moreover, the study also found that the youth, unlike older voters, tend to be more affected by the number of years that the incumbent party has been in power when deciding whether to vote. In addition, the incumbent's performance on job creation, compared with other socioeconomic issues demonstrates a sizeable influence on the youth's partisan attachments. Among those who do engage in protests, higher levels of economic deprivation, as well as high levels of education, tend to be significant predictors for the youth but not for the non-youth.

In an attempt to get citizens (youths) more involved in political participation, scholars like Calestous Juma have called for the reduction in voters' age, from 18 to 16. However, Resnick and Daniela (18), observe that reducing the age limit will not get any more positive result. This is because, the findings of their research revealed that it is the older people that mostly get involved or interested in political activities. This then answers in part, the question of why we have old people as leaders in African countries.

Furthermore, Resnick and Daniela analyzed the impact of education on youth's political participation (especially in protest). They claim that impact of education on protest activities only manifests through the youth group, suggesting that young and well-educated Africans are more likely to express dissatisfaction with the status-quo through protests because they are the ones who possesses greater expectations about their futures(16-17).

**The Superman and Politics**

The politics of developing countries, especially in Africa are characterized by a wide range of unique challenges, opportunities, and complexities. These countries, often referred to as "developing" or "less developed" for example Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Sudan, Cameroon and so on are typically in the process of industrialization, modernization, and social and economic transformation. The political landscape in developing countries can be influenced by various factors, including historical legacies, governance structures, economic

conditions, and social dynamics. In order for these countries to attain development and compete with other countries, there is need for majority of the citizens to be fully involved in the running of their countries through political participation.

Lack of political participation can be attributed to various factors, and it is important to note that these factors can vary from one individual to another or from one group to another. Some common reasons for the lack of political participation include, time constraints, lack of information, political polarization, low or lack of trust in government, disenfranchisement, fear of backlash, lack of motivation, electoral system issues, apathy, citizens disillusionment with the political process due to perceived corruption, ineffective governance, or broken promises by politicians. Efforts to increase political participation often involve addressing these issues through education, voter outreach, reforming electoral systems, and promoting civic engagement to ensure that broader range of voices are heard in the political process. Nietzsche must have foreseen this situation in his days  and posited the superman as a way out of the situation. If citizens of developing countries can imbibe the virtues of the superman and the will to challenge and change the *status-quo*, the drive to be creative, and innovative, then, they will be heading towards political development.

If we compare the European societies of Nietzsche's days  with most African societies of the present, we will realize that things are almost the same in some regards. Some achievements may have been made concerning what is right or wrong and how we perceive ourselves and others. For instance, in certain countries like Nigeria, the right to free expression is practiced. Nevertheless, a lot of barriers prevent people from realizing their true selves and from living freely and joyfully.  But imbibing the characteristics of the superman and contrasting them with current attributes will help young people and even older people to know how close or far they are from becoming one. For instance, if one lack openness or joy, or  if they do not live with the desire for power or aspire to nobility of character, then  such an individual will still have a long way to go in the transvaluation of values because,  Nietzsche's concept of the superman is a practical tool for improving citizenship via political engagement.

Different interpretations may be deduced from Nietzsche's concept of the Superman, or *Übermensch*, and its application to promoting political engagement in developing nations may be difficult a topic but the notion of the Superman entails the repudiation of prevailing norms and the elevation of the individual will to power. This interpretation may be seen as an exhortation to transcend conventional morality and establish personal standards. It is important

to proceed cautiously when interpreting the concept of the Superman, this is because Nietzsche's ideas may be misunderstood and a misinterpretation  may lead to a disrespect for social justice and the well-being of the nation as a whole. The notion of the Superman encourages the individual's quest for personal perfection. Consequently, any attempt to promote political engagement in developing nations through the application of Nietzsche's Superman concept needs to be accompanied by a critical analysis of its possible effects on social cohesiveness and equality.

**Relevance of "superman" in  political participation**

The idea of the Superman is complex and its relevance to politic can be interpreted in various ways, depending on one's perspective. Here are some key aspects of Nietzsche's concept of the Superman and its potential relevance in African politics:

1. **Individualism and Self-Overcoming**: Nietzsche's Superman is an individual who transcends societal norms and values, striving to become their authentic self by overcoming limitations and constraints imposed by society. This can help in creating political consciousness by encouraging individuals to question the traditional values and norms that underpin political systems and institutions. This idea can be seen as a call for individuals to break free from conformity and question established political and moral norms. It can inspire political leaders or citizens to think critically and to challenge the status-quo. **Moral Autonomy:** Nietzsche believes that the Superman creates his own values and moral code, unburdened by the traditional religious or societal morals of his time. In politics, this can be seen as an argument for moral autonomy and a rejection of dogmatic political ideologies. This can help in creating political consciousness by encouraging individuals to question the

traditional values and norms that underpin political systems and institutions. The Superman encourages a more nuanced approach to ethics in governance, one that is not bound by rigid ideologies but is based on a deeper understanding of human nature and flourishing.

2. **Critique of complacency and passivity:** Nietzsche's idea of the Superman involves overcoming the weak pessimism of "herd morality". The *Übermensch* may be cold-blooded, but he is not a fascist since his only purpose is himself. The opposite of this self-asserting individual is the "Last Man" which according to Nietzsche is characterized by mediocrity, comfort and a profound lack of appreciation.  If the *Übermensch* subjugates others it is only for personal ambition, not for a national or racial ethos. Rather, Nietzsche recognizes that authoritarianism of any kind subsumes individual will, and further thought that all ideology is a craven avoidance of the austere truths of the world. Overcoming complacency and passivism can help in creating political consciousness by encouraging individuals to take active role in shaping their own lives and the world around them.

Following from the above, Nietzsche's concept of the superman, or the *Übermensch*, can be seen as an idea of humans who create their own values based on their experience in life. It represents the highest principle of development of humanity and designates the affirmation of man's full potentiality and creativity. Nietzsche posits the concept of the superman as a critique on religion, morality, and the crisis of modernity, as well as a panacea to the social problems of his time. The doctrine of the superman according to Ojimba and

Anthony represents an attempt by Nietzsche to deal with the problem of moral and religious decadence (20).

Scholars like Nussbaum (1), argues that although, Nietzsche saw himself as a political thinker, that there is no evidence of such. However, we believe that Nussbaum's reason is in error as a careful perusal of Nietzsche's Zarathustra does not only have ethical concerns but also political inclinations. But above all, some of Nietzsche's idea of the superman has the potential to be relevant in politics. Generally, Nietzsche's concept of the Superman, or Übermensch, is relevant to political participation in Africa, particularly in the context of decolonization and the impact of global influences on African culture. The Superman symbolizes human potential, inspiring individuals to transcend societal constraints and embrace their inherent greatness. The theory of the superman will enable the higher type of man to develop his full potentials" (Chukwuelobe 45).

In the African context, Nietzsche's idea of the Superman can be linked to political awareness among Africans, leading to a common goal of fighting for freedom and human rights (Myrice 4). However, even within these African countries, there is need for citizens to stand up to their leaders when they fail. The Superman represents the highest expression of the will to power, therefore embracing the qualities of the Superman, individuals in Africa can engage in constructive thinking,  this will enable them to question the existing status-quo that are detrimental to their progress and development as a people (Ikuli and Anthony 75).

**Conclusion**

Nietzsche's concept of the Superman may offer thought-provoking insights, its direct application to fostering political participation in developing countries may be complex and will require careful consideration of its ethical and social ramifications. It is essential to approach this issue with a nuanced understanding of Nietzsche's philosophy and its potential impact on collective action and social justice. Adopting these ideals to the specific cultural and social contexts of developing countries will spur political participation among their youths.

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