



# RECONNOITRING ARCHETYPAL SIGNIFICANCE: A STUDY OF DONALD NICHOLS IN THE KING OF SPIES AND BHISHMA IN THE MAHABHARATA

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## **Abstract**

The archetypal study of Donald Nichols in Blaine Harden’s King of Spies and, Bhishma, a character from the famous Indian epic The Mahabharata, examines the resemblances in obligation, sacrifice, and moral quandaries. The area of this study is to determine the commonalities that connect human experiences throughout history. The study also adds to the boundary debate on archetypal analysis by highlighting the symbols' universality and capacity to connect disparate narratives, civilizations, and historical eras. It also presents Donald Nichols, a contemporary person whose decisions and methods of living amazingly resemble Bhishma. It also looks at the historical and cultural settings, in which these archetypes arise, taking into account how societal norms and values affect these characters are depicted.

**Keywords:** archetype, culture, morality, historical, universal

## **1.Introduction**

Human history and literature are replete with characters that embody universal archetypes and represent fundamental human experiences, emotions, and moral



quandaries. This paper delves into the archetypal analysis of two seemingly disparate figures: Donald Nichols, a complex and controversial intelligence officer of the 20th century who is portrayed in Blaine Harden’s biography *King of Spies*, and Bhishma, the revered patriarch from the ancient Indian epic *The Mahabharata*. By exploring the archetypal dimensions of Bhishma and Nichols, this study seeks to unknot the common threads of duty in war and loyalty that bind the characters across time, geography, and cultural contexts.

## 2.Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a comparative archetypal analysis of Bhishma and Donald Nichols, exploring the parallels in their character traits, moral dilemmas, and the consequences of their actions. This research holds significance in elucidating the enduring appeal and relevance of archetypes in literature, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries. By comparing Bhishma and Donald Nichols, the study provides valuable insights into the shared human experiences of moral dilemmas, duty, sacrifice, and loyalty. Furthermore, the research contributes to the broader discourse on archetypal analysis, emphasizing the universality of these symbols and their ability to bridge diverse narratives, cultures, and historical periods.

## 3.Research Methodology

The research employs a comparative analysis approach, delving into the textual representations of Bhishma in the *Mahabharata* and the historical accounts of Donald Nichols' life. By closely examining specific incidents and character developments, the study seeks to identify common archetypal motifs, drawing connections between these seemingly disparate figures. Additionally, the research will consider the socio-cultural contexts in which these characters are situated, providing a comprehensive understanding of the archetypes within their respective backgrounds.

## 4.King of Spies

*King of Spies: The Dark Reign of America’s Spymaster in Korea* is a non-fiction book written by the American author and journalist Blaine Harden. The book digs into the intriguing life of Donald Nichols, an American intelligence operative during the



Korean War. Nichols operated in the shadows, gathering crucial information behind enemy lines and playing a significant role in the conflict. The book explores the covert operations, the complexities of the Korean War, and the impact of Nichols’ actions on the course of history. Harden’s narrative paints a compelling portrait of war and its consequences.

#### 5.The Mahabaratha

The Mahabaratha is one of the major ancient Sanskrit epics of India. It is traditionally attributed to sage Vyasa and is considered one of the longest and most important texts in Hindu literature. It centres on the Kurukshetra War, a great battle fought between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two branches of the Kuru dynasty. Bhishma is one of the most important characters who is the grand uncle of both the Pandavas and the Kauravas and plays a significant role throughout the epic.

#### 6.Parallel between Nichols and Bhishma

War affords a connection between Donald Nichols and Bhishma. Blaine Harden provides the real character in his non-fiction King of Spies in a fictional way of narrative technique. The interpretation of the real person Nichols with the epic character Bhishma is a reader’s way of analysing the book in a different style. This is clear from:

The meaning of the text is never-formulated; the reader must act upon the textual material in order to produce meaning. Wolfgang Iser argues that literary texts always contain ‘blanks’ which only the readers can ‘fill’ (Selden, 2005, p. 47 ).

#### 7.Archetypes and Fiction

There are several mythical characters from different cultures who share archetypal comparisons- Karna from The Mahabaratha share similarities allowing comparison for many characters. Velutha from Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things and Karna from The Mahabharata share similarities that allow for a comparison. Both characters evoke themes of social injustice, birthright, and tragic heroism. Ekalavya (The Mahabharatha) like Velutha, explores themes of discrimination, sacrifice, and the price one pays for social prejudices. Heathcliff from Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte is an outsider and suffers social rejection like Karna. His deep love for Catherine



Earnshaw and his complex, morally ambiguous nature parallel Karna’s emotional struggles and his loyalty to Duryodhana despite being mistreated due to his low social status. “A picture is normally a picture "of" something: it depicts or illustrates a "subject" made up of things analogous to "objects" in sense experience” (Fyre, 2020, p. 131).

#### 8. Archetypes and Non-fiction

Archetypes are universal symbols or themes that are present in the literature, myths, and folklore of many cultures. These archetypes often represent fundamental human motivations and experiences. While in real life, certain traits or behaviours are associated with these archetypes can be observed in society. Here are a few examples of archetype characters and their real-life counterparts.

Mother Teresa can be compared to the archetype of The Bodhisattva an enlightened being who chooses to remain in the cycle of birth and death to help all other beings. They dedicate their lives to the service of others, practicing compassion, generosity, and selflessness. She worked tirelessly and selflessly to alleviate the sufferings of others, embodying the spirit of compassion and service that is central to The Bodhivastha archetype.

Prometheus from Greek mythology can be considered an archetype for Nelson Mandela in certain aspects. Prometheus defied the gods to bring knowledge and fire to humanity, symbolizing the fight against tyranny and the empowerment of people. Similarly, Mandela fought against apartheid, a deeply oppressive system, and stood up for the rights and dignity of his fellow South Africans. Prometheus endured eternal punishment for his act of kindness towards humanity, much like Mandela, who sacrificed his freedom for twenty-seven years, enduring imprisonment, to fight against injustice and advocate for a free and equal South Africa. This is clearly stated in:

Normally, politicians, pop singers, film stars, celebrities, strive to become abstract images, mass-produced legends. When the images return to reality, it is because they are being diminished and reduced by scandal, becoming not just human but all too human. Mandela reversed this process and taught us that a real, living man, alert and strategic, is infinitely more powerful than an abstract image. His great gift to his people,

indeed, was to embody the revolution as a creature of humanity: frail, imperfect, and real (O’Toole, 2013).

While not a direct parallel, the symbolism and the themes associated with Prometheus are used metaphorically to understand Mandela’s struggle and his role as a beacon of hope and progress in the face of adversity. Archetypes often serve as universal symbols that can be applied to various contexts to understand and interpret human experiences.

### 9. Archetypal Criticism

Archetypal literary criticism is a type of analytical theory that interprets texts by focusing on recurring myths and archetypes in the narrative, symbols, images, and characters in the literary works. “As an acknowledged form of literary criticism, it dates back to 1934 when Classical scholar Maud Bodkin published *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (Wikipedia Contributors, 2024). To quote: “In literary criticism, the term archetype denotes recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character-types, themes, and images which are identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature, as well as in myths, dreams, and even social rituals” (Abrams, 1999, p.12). An important antecedent of the literary theory of the archetype was the treatment of myth by a group of comparative anthropologists at Cambridge University, especially James G. Frazer whose *The Golden Bough* identified elemental patterns of myth and ritual that claimed, recur in the legends and ceremonials of diverse and far-flung cultures and religion.

In connecting Donald Nichols and Bhishma to Carl Jung’s archetypes, it becomes evident that these characters share fundamental symbolic traits that resound with the worldwide themes of wisdom, heroism, mentorship, sacrifice, and protection. Their stories, though set in different times and cultures, tap into the collective unconscious, making them relatable and enduring figures in the realm of archetypal literature.

Carl G. Jung applied the term “archetype” to what he called “primordial images”, the “psychic residence” of repeated patterns of experience in our very ancient ancestors which, he maintained, survive in the “collective unconscious” of the human race and are expressed in myths, religion, dreams, and private fantasies, as well as in works of literature. (Barad, 2014)



Northrop Fyre, a renowned literary theorist, contributed significantly to the understanding of archetypes in literature through his works on myth and literary criticism. Fyre’s approach to archetypes emphasizes the role of myths and symbols in shaping the structure of literature. Connecting Donald Nichols and Bhishma to Northrop Fyre’s perspective on archetypes involves understanding their roles as symbolic figures within the large mythic and literary contexts.

## 10. Discussion

### 10.1 Parent’s Role

Nichols was born on 18 February 1923 to Walter Issac and Myra Stewart Nichols, New Jersey. He was the youngest of the four sons. He completed only elementary school before joining the military. His mother abandoned him and his three older brothers. His father takes the four boys to South Florida. He dropped out of the school in seventh grade. He enrolled himself in the army at seventeen. In order to help his family he joined the army.

Bhishma was a key participant in the great Kurukshetra War, a colonial battle between righteousness and greed. What set him apart is his lifelong celibacy and his commitment to serving the kingdom of Hastinapura regardless of personal desires. This vow, known as the row of brahmacharya, was taken to fulfill his father’s wishes, Bhishma’s unyielding dedication to his father’s word and his kingdom made him a central moral figure in the Mahabharata, a symbolizing duty, sacrifice, and honour.

These two characters, from different contexts and periods, both exemplify the influence of parental wishes on their choices and actions, showcasing the intricate interplay between personal motivations and familial expectations in shaping their lives.

### 10.2 Donald Nichols as the Heroic Spy:

#### Archetype- The Hero

Donald Nichols embodies the archetype of the Hero, a character who embarks on a quest, faces challenges, and achieves great deeds. In his case, the quest is the covert intelligence gathering, during the Korean War. He represents the qualities of bravery, resilience, and self-sacrifice. His motivation to participate in the war due to his parent’s influence aligns with the Hero’s sense of duty and responsibility to his country. The



archetype of the Hero often involves a journey, both physical and metaphorical, reflecting the challenges and transformations faced by the character.

### 10.3 Bhishma as the Noble Patriarch:

#### Archetype-The Wise Old Man

Bhishma embodies the archetype of the wise old man, a character often found in mythology and folklore. He is a figure of wisdom, integrity, and honour. Bhishma’s participation in the war due to his father’s vow represents the archetype’s theme of honouring traditions and fulfilling obligations. The wise old man archetype typically imports guidance and moral lessons, and Bhishma serves his role in the Mahabharata by offering profound teachings on duty, righteousness and loyalty. His decisions and sacrifices are driven by a deep sense of familial duty, making him a quintessential representation of this archetype.

In both cases, the characters’ actions are deeply rooted in their relationships with their parents, reflecting the archetypal theme of familial heroism and Bhishma’s wisdom are heightened by their connection with their parents, illustrating the timeless significance of family dynamics within the frameworks of archetypal storytelling.

### 10.4 Donald Nichols- The Warrior Archetype

Donald Nichols, as a military figure embodies the warrior archetype. Warriors are often characterized by their courage, discipline, and commitment to a cause. In the context of war, they are responsible for defending their people and their beliefs. However, the shadow aspect of the warrior archetype can manifest as aggression, ruthlessness, and lack of empathy, leading to actions that result in harm and death. This shadow can emerge when the noble qualities of the warrior, such as bravery and loyalty are corrupted by power and ideology. The horror of war is clearly explained below:

That U.S. bombing campaign, which continued for three years, destroyed all of the country’s cities and towns. Napalms and conventional explosives razed 85 percent of its buildings. The North Korean government never released numbers on civilian deaths, but the population of the country officially declined during the war by 1,311,000, or 14 percent. General Curtis E. Le May, head of the Strategic Air

Command during the war, guessed that American bombs killed even more: about 20 percent of the North Korean population, roughly 1,900,000 people. Americans would never pay much attention to these deaths, but outside of the United States the bombing was widely regarded as a war crime (Harden, 2018, p. 9).

### 10.5 Bhishma- The Warrior Archetype

Bhishma embodies the sage-warrior archetype. He is a skilled warrior, yet also possesses deep insight and knowledge, making him a respected adviser and leader. Despite his noble intentions and adherence to his vows, he becomes entangled in a web of familial and political conflicts, leading to tragic consequences. His flaw eventually leads to his downfall and suffering.

These characters serve as cautionary tales, illustrating the complexities of the warrior archetype and the consequences of its shadow manifestations. They remind the importance of balance; ethical considerations and understanding that even the noblest of intentions can lead to tragedy when taken to extremes.

### 10.6 Tragic-flaw

Nichols's tragic flaw lies in his unwavering commitment to his mission, even at the cost of betraying and sacrificing his men as a spy. His pursuit of espionage and military objectivities binds him to ethical boundaries, leading him down the path of moral corruption. Nichols's hubris and over-confidence drive him to believe that his actions are justified for the greatest good. He sees war as a necessary sacrifice, making difficult decisions without considering the human cost, especially the lives of his own soldiers. This is clear from these lines:

This hideous civil war-one that is seldom mentioned and has never become part of America’s understanding of Korea-was Nichols’s training ground. He travelled to the countryside to watch government executions. He was a regular attendee at torture session in Seoul. In the words of John Muccio, the American ambassador in Seoul, Nichols became “especially close” to the Korean National Police, which took the lead in interrogating, torturing, and executing suspecting Communists (Harden, 2018, p.39-40)





Bhishma’s tragic flaw is in the unyielding loyalty and commitment to his oaths, even when fighting against his relatives (Pandavas) and causing immense suffering. Bhishma’s vanity is rooted in his belief that his duty to the throne is absolute and unquestionable. Despite his noble intentions, his inability to reconcile his duty with his values leads to a deeply moving and sorrowful narrative.

Both Nichols and Bhishma are Tragic Heroes, who share a common thread of inflexible commitment to their downfall. Their hubris highlights the universal theme of the tragic hero archetype. Despite their noble intentions, their actions result in tragedy serving as the balancing duty with empathy and compassion. In comparing these characters, it can be identified how different cultures and backgrounds can lead down similar tragic paths, emphasising the timeless and universal nature of the tragic hero archetype.

#### 10.7 Tragic-Hero Archetype

The sorrowful deaths of Donald Nichols and Bhishma exhibit similar archetypal themes. Nichols's tragedy is his unrelenting dedication to his mission, even at the expense of morality and the lives of his men. The intelligence career of Nichols came to a secretive and tragic end in 1957, when the Air Force suddenly relieved him of his command, removed him from Korea, and sent him to psychiatric wards at U.S military hospitals. He died in the psychiatric ward of a hospital. His suffering is clearly explained as follows:

Nichols was given a convalescent leave over Christmas to visit his brother Judson and his family in Florida. While he was there, he told his relatives that he had been receiving shock therapy and that he would have to return to Eglin for more. “He said it was not health care,” his nephew recalled. “but that the government wanted to erase his brain-because he knew too much (Harden, 2018, p. 165)

Bhishma’s tragic end causes harm to his kin. His commitment to his principles blinds him to the evolving moral landscapes and familial bonds leading to tragic outcomes. On the tenth day of the war, the Pandava Prince Arjun, with the help of Shikandi, pierced Bhishma with numerous arrows and paralysed him upon a bed of arrows. After spending fifty-one nights in an arrow bed, Bhishma passed away.

Both Nichols and Bhishma, despite their flaws and tragic paths, find redemption in their final moments. Their deaths serve as moments of profound realisation, where they confront the consequences of their actions and seek a form of spiritual or moral redemption.

While Nichols's redemption is more internal, marked by his realisation of the gravity of his deeds, Bhishma's redemption is external, reflected in the wisdom he imparts to the Kauravas and the succeeding generation. Both characters, through their tragic endings, demonstrate the complexity of the human experience, when even in the face of immense mistakes and suffering, there can be moments of insight and redemption that provide a sense of closure to the readers.

## 11. Conclusion

It underscores the universal themes of duty, sacrifice, and ethical dilemmas that bind their stories together, transcending the boundaries of time and culture. The paper concludes by reflecting on the significance of studying such archetypes, highlighting the insights they offer into the complexities of human nature and the moral challenges faced by individuals across different eras. When concluding an article on the archetypal analysis of characters like Bhishma in the Mahabharata and individuals from real life such as Donald Nichols in King of Spies, there are several avenues for future research and exploration.

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