INTRODUCTION

The *Mahabharata*, the world's largest epic, is the narrative that marks the culmination of India's narrative tradition. The epic has generated innumerable literature from early times and still continues to inspire creative writers.

The *Mahabharata*, an *Itihasa-Purana*, has been present in the Indian consciousness moulding the very character of the Indian peoples. Drawing inspiration and guidance from the epic, the world of the *Mahabharata* has been extended into the present, by creative artists from time to time. As the epic's trans-creator P.Lal writes, the *Mahabharata* has infinite possibilities for expansion of our feeling and our imagination (see, Dandekar 1990, 302). According to P.Lal, the epic of Vyasa is not a literary masterpiece of the past tucked away in the museums and libraries. Its characters still walk the Indian streets, its animals populate our forests and its legends and myths haunt and inspire the Indian imagination. The *Mahabharata*, which guides its readers to live better following the *purusharthas*, is marked by its timeless quality and is relevant to the past and present alike.

A classic that reveals newer levels of meanings at each reading exerts a unique influence on the readers and leaves an indelible impression on their minds. Every revisit to the book is like a new encounter and the epic holds eternal fascination for the reader with its enduring relevance to all times.

Christopher Hill, historian, in his *World Turned Upside Down* writes: "History has to be rewritten in every generation because although the past does not change, the present does; each generation asks new questions of the past and finds new areas of sympathy as it relives different aspects of experience of its predecessors" (Hill 1975, 15). The huge canvas of the *Mahabharata* is an abundant source of rich material for the modern writers who try to recreate a miniature world of the epic through their creative
expressions. While selectively adopting from the epic, they extract a linear narrative from the interlinked narratives of the epic to recreate a story of their own.

The objective of this study is to consider the place of the *Mahabharata* in the Narrative Tradition of India and also to understand 'how' and 'why' the creative writers re-interpret the text, placing themselves in a world far away from the epic world. The *Mahabharata*, which had grown in corpus over the centuries, undergoes a reverse process in the handling of the modern writer. The writers not only interpret the epic through a microscopic vision but also obliterate the material in the epic that they feel is not essential for their articulation. Thus, the embedded narrative of the *Mahabharata* acquires a linear quality where only some characters are present and some situations are discussed. The protagonists are projected as flesh-and-blood human beings living in a world where their thoughts and emotions are discernible to modern man.

The writers thus exploit the infinite possibilities of expansion contained in the *Mahabharata* and search out answers for intricate moral issues and complicated situations, interpreting the text in their own way. According to M.T.Vasudevan Nair (Introduction, *Second Turn*) the writers try to fill in the 'meaningful gaps' left out by Vyasa and interpret the 'pregnant silences' present in the epic. While doing so, they place the characters and situations in the modern context and try to weigh the actions as acceptable to modern sensibility. Thus, Draupadi is transformed into a modern woman who is conscious of the social issues and who is unable to come to terms with the situation of polyandry imposed upon her. Bhima is endowed with a raging spirit, which complements the super-human strength of his body. Karna, though dejected by his ill fate, rises above the situation to become an epitome of loyalty and compassion.

For the purpose of comparison, six novelistic retellings of the *Mahabharata* have been selected. While the novels *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha

The study analyses the various literary forms developed in the Indian narrative tradition and tries to understand the characteristics of the *Mahabharata* as an *Itihasa-Purana*. It also examines the nature of retellings and links it to *khandakatha*, which is a rewritten story from a larger work. The *Mahabharata*, which has acquired the status of the *Itihasa-Purana* in the narrative tradition of India, has been the perennial source for *khandakathas* or rewritten stories. The modern retelling themselves, which are re-written stories from the epic could be categorised as *khandakathas* in the Indian narrative tradition.