CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

THE MAHABHARATA: CREATIVE AND CRITICAL TRADITIONS

Universal in significance, timeless in its appeal, The Mahabharata is a veritable treatise on the ethics of choice in every human predicament. It has been generally hailed as the ‘Fifth Veda’ and Vyasa’s ‘Millennial Banquet’. It has undergone several recreations through translations, adaptations and transcreations by generations of writers. Each recreation or retelling goes to prove the living literary tradition of the epic. Northrop Frye in Anatomy of Criticism remarks that “the traditional tales and myths and histories have a strong tendency to stick together and form encyclopaedic aggregates [...] and in India where the process of transmission was more relaxed, the two traditional epics apparently went on distending themselves for centuries like pythons swallowing sheep” (56). As the epic acquires perpetual growth and enrichment, it assimilates into itself the socio-cultural history of the nation. R C Shah in “The Mahabharata as the Inspiration for Living Literary Tradition” in Dandekar’s The Mahabharata Revisited traces the history of the creative renderings of the epic. He endorses Sri Aurobindo’s statement that the epic has become the creation and expression of a collective national mind, which also proves the close link between the epic and the history of the nation (245).

Any upheaval in the society necessitates a review of the past. The two World Wars have caused so great a devastation that the need to search for a force that binds humanity together is felt more than ever before. R C Shah says that every period of social transformation tends to exact an effort of reorientation.
towards the cultural past of the community as a vital ingredient of the struggle to face the present and shape the future (246). Several writers have attempted to recreate the epic to reflect the spirit of the times and this is a sure proof of the inherent richness of the epic. V.S Sethuraman in "Literature After Theory. A case study" published in Indian Journal of American Studies says, "a conscious search for unassimilated stubborn elements in older works of art and a conscious retelling of old stories and discovering of parallel situations have added a new dimension to our cultural and critical discourse" (34). Some writers have re-rendered the epic in their own idiom but always with a nostalgia for the old. Some have chosen to deviate from Vyasa's epic to express their own ideological concerns. They fall into two broad categories of retellings and fictional renderings. The word retell is used in the sense of a faithful re-rendering of the epic in the writer's own diction and style. On the other hand, fictional renderings signify the creative artist's freedom to recast the events and to reinterpret the characters to serve the professed intent of the novelist. There has been a wide range of mode of narration in different literary genres. A brief review of the available re-renderings is also given in this chapter followed by a review of extant criticism.

Considering the vastness of the existing corpus, the present study has been limited to Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel, S.L. Bhyrappa's Parva and Pratibha Ray's Yajnaseni. The Great Indian Novel has been written in English. Parva originally written in Kannada has been translated into English by K.Raghavendra Rao. Yajnaseni an Oriya novel has been translated into English.
by Pradeep Bhattacharya. The works are worth a serious study on account of the new perspectives that emerge from them and the thesis does not propose to assess them as translations. These three works have fictionalised the *Mahabharata* from a non-traditional perspective. The perspective in these works has been shaped by the shifts in the social political and cultural milieu of the twentieth century. Fictionalising is a process that involves recasting of events, reinterpretation of characters, deviations and distortions.

This thesis examines how the process of fictionalising the epic in contemporary times has resulted in a reinforcement of its relevance. It does not make an attempt at presenting the glory of the epic by expounding the moral and ethical values found in it. Such an exercise will be a redundant endeavour. All the three works fall outside the traditional parameters of assessment of the epic and they are shaped by the distinct socio-political concerns of the writers. Some of the concepts of contemporary critical theories that aid the study of fictionalising the epic are selectively used. No single approach is consistently applied to all the texts. The approach adopted for each text is dependent on the socio-political concerns of the author and will necessarily vary.

Reacting against the immense popularity of the televised *Ramayana*, Romila Thapar calls attention to the plurality of the *Ramayana* in Indian history as quoted by Paula Richman in *Many Ramayanas*.

The *Ramayana* does not belong to anyone moment in history for it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and
places [...] The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations which changed the conceptualization of character, event and meaning (4).

Just like the multiple tellings of the Ramayana, an array of re-renderings of its twin epic the Mahabharata displays a scintillating variety and richness. In this context it is worth quoting the views of A.K Ramanujan on the various tellings of Ramayana. He says that the Ramayana tradition can be likened to a pool of signifiers that include the plot, characters, names, geography, incidents and relations and argues that each Ramayana can be seen as a crystallization. He says, "these various texts not only relate to prior texts directly, to borrow or refute but they relate to each other through a common code or common pool. Every author, if one may hazard a metaphor, dips into it and brings out a unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context (Richman 46). A.K Ramanujan’s findings are equally applicable to the different versions of The Mahabharata and the three texts chosen for study provide fresh insights into the epic.

A study of the process of fictionalisation leading to either reassessment or distortion of the epic necessitates the recognition of a canonical text or a standard text against which the deviations have to be discussed. The recognition of such a basic text raises issues in relation to authorship and
authenticity of the text. Traditional belief points to Vyasa as the author of the *Mahabharata*. P.L. Bhargava, in *Retrieval of History from Puranic Myths*, says that the *Mahabharata* is popularly believed to be a creation of Vyasa.

The internal evidence of the great epic indicates that it was originally called *Jaya* since it narrated only the events leading to the victory of the Pandavas over the Kauravas. This original poem probably consisted of only 8800 verses. These verses, however, appeared so intricate after the lapse of some centuries that the need for amplifications was felt. The poem thus swelled to the size of 24,000 verses and came to be called *Bharata*. There were, however, still no episodes in it. Its popularity eventually led to its conversion into a compendium of knowledge with the addition of all kinds of episodes and didactic matter raising its bulk to 1,00,000 verses. In its final form it received the name *Mahabharata* (89).

Similar opinions have been expressed by several critics on the text of the *Mahabharata*. Irawati Karve in *Yuganta* has recognized the accretive nature of the epic. The word `*Mahabharata*' forces us to recognize stages in the making of this poem. Perhaps, there was a simpler and less extensive story called Bharata and then, by century long accretions, it became a maha (integral) Bharata (book about the descendants of Bharata).
The present version of the book, however, lets one know that there was a still an earlier time when the narration had the much shorter and simpler name, Jaya (Victory). This means that in its earliest form the narration was a poem of triumph, and told of the victory of a particular king over his rival kinsmen (1).

Her supposition is based on the idea that the word Vyasa as a title meant arranger a man who throws together or orders. She says, “from the Mahabharata story we know that his own name was Krishna (the black) Dvaipayana (born on an island) If we take into consideration this tradition, then perhaps, Vyasa was not the original composer of the story but the man who might have taken it as told by the suta bards and arranged it” (7).

The views of Bhargava and Karve point to an assumption that the Mahabharata was compiled by Vyasa and that he should have been influenced by the oral tradition of reciting stories by Suta (Bards) Krishna Chaitanya in his literary study of the Mahabharata also refers to such suppositions regarding Vyasa’s contribution to the text of 100000 couplets which could not be attributed to a single creative consciousness.

In Chaitanya’s opinion also the idea of collective authorship is attributed to the Mahabharata. He says, that “Tradition refers to a first version, the Jaya of 8800 couplets, a second, the Bharata, of 24,000 couplets, and the third and final, the Mahabharata in its present form with over 100000 couplets He thinks that this process of growth may have taken centuries It is not possible to think in
terms of a poet, a single creative consciousness, to whom we can attribute the poem. He further states that there is no specific reference in the *Mahabharata* to Vyasa as the editor of the Vedas.

The opening chapter of the Adi Parvan does make the claim that the epic gives the essence of all the four Vedas, but this is a wholly different thing. On the other hand, there is pointed mention in the Adi Parvan that he re-edited the epic itself several times [ ] but the point is that there is great emphasis on the work done as a Vyasa or editor. The primary work too was one of editorship though one of supremely creative editing and this must have been a lifetime undertaking. The contemporaries of the poet could easily have got into the habit of referring to him as Vyasa. In later times, he was regarded by mistake as the editor of the Vedas. By long usage Vyasa has become as good as a personal name and we too shall use it that way (XIII).

*Sri Aurobindo* is of the opinion that the original epic consisted of 26400 slokas but the final form runs to 1,00,000. (9)

\[\text{Astau sloka - sahasrani astau sloka - satanica/} \]
\[\text{Aham, vedmi suko vetti sanjayo vetti va na va/} \]

This sloka by Vyasa hints at the collaborative efforts put in by him, his son SUKA, and SANJAYA to transmit the epic orally to the succeeding generation. According to Aurobindo, western Indologists have given a faulty interpretation of
this sloka, in that, they thought that the sloka is intended to tell the readers the total number of slokas contained in the original text. But Vyasa himself says that he wrote the Mahabharata in 1,00000 slokas and as such he calls it Sata - Sahasri. Therefore, what Vyasa means to say in the above sloka is that he, Suka, and Sanjaya committed to memory 26,400. The rest of the text was distributed among the disciples of Vyasa (9).

Ancient Indians mastered the art of learning by committing to memory several thousand verses, formulas and maxims. It has been said that Panini's towering masterpiece Astadhyayi is composed in the form of a string of short statements, no doubt to facilitate memorization (Rajaram & Frawley 137). The oral tradition of learning through discussions, debates and logistic dialogues (tarka) widened their perspective and made acquisition of knowledge a pleasurable experience. Sidney's sixteenth century concept of instruction and delight had been actively put into practice by the ancient Indian Scholars. These techniques of learning and memorization which the west now recognises as superlearning-techniques are part of the rich (cultural) heritage of India. David Frawley and Rajaram point out, "Vedic civilization was predominantly an indigenous evolution. All the ingredients necessary for human development are right there in the heartland going back to time immemorial" (208). It is a figment of the imagination of the Indologists, who are unfamiliar with the ancient Indian methodology of learning that discredits Vyasa as a mere compiler and not the sole author of the Mahabharata.
These observations point to the traditional assumptions of Vyasa as the author of the epic endorsed by a general acceptance of such a belief for practical reasons. The thesis refers to the final form of the text called the *Mahabharata* having 100000 couplets commonly attributed to Vyasa as the basic text against which deviations and distortions are discussed. The earliest English translation by M.N. Dutt in seven volumes based on the Calcutta edition of northern recension is used for all the practical purposes of reference. Dutt's edition is the only available sloka to sloka translation in English. The transliterated verses of the Sanskrit text of Vyasa are given separately wherever necessary. Since the English translation and the Sanskrit text of Vyasa are based on different critical editions, the sloka numbers do not always correspond. But thematically, both texts refer to the same episode or event.

V.S. Sethuraman in "Literature after Theory: A case study" refers to The *Mahabharata* as a canonical text. The word canon is defined as "the body of texts culturally perceived as pre-eminent for their aesthetic quality and their imputed truth. Ecclesiastically, it refers to works accepted as having divine authority" (Pam Morris 195). *The Random House Dictionary of The English Language* defines "canon as 'the body of rules, principles or standards accepted as axiomatic and universally binding in a field of study or art.' neo classical canon, Literature, the works of an author which have been accepted as authentic, there are thirty seven plays in the Shakespeare canon". Going by these definitions, the *Mahabharata* canon includes the authorized, accepted text of Vyasa, with 100000 couplets, culturally considered as pre-eminent for its aesthetic quality.
and imputed truth. It is this text that has served as a canonical text for generation of writers who have attempted to retell the epic.

The recognition of a basic text in order to set off the deviations raises issues relating to authorship, influences and evolutionary nature of the text itself. Chaitanya’s remark that the opening chapter of the epic claiming that it contains the essence of all the four Vedas reveals the earliest influences on the epic itself. The idea of influence of the Vedas has been well illustrated by Sethuraman in his “Resonance and Intertextuality”, in *A Way of Leaving So as to Say*. He observes that the metaphor, the rhythm and the philosophical implications of the comments on the nature of man, his mortality, found in the Bhagawad Gita are precisely those of the earlier Upanishadic text *Kathopanishad*. He says, “we have here not so much an instance of echo or allusion as of intertextuality” (159). In the same essay he refers to the blurring of distinctions in the last few decades of the century and influence has been replaced by intertextuality. Obviously a study of the fictionalisation of *Mahabharata* has necessitated an examination of concepts such as influence, intertextuality, role of the author and so on in which there are echoes of some of the current literary doctrines of western critical theories.

Sethuraman discusses Harold Blooms’ claim in *The Anxiety of Influence* that every text is an intertext, and says that Bloom sees the desire to evade earlier writing as a central motivation in literary production:

Every poet is influenced by his precursor poet, but he would consciously try ‘to kill’ the precursor poet. No strong poem
alludes to another and what looks like overt allusions and echoes in strong poems are disguises for darker relationship. [ ]

Intertextuality seems to be more complex. The term was coined by Julia Kristeva to denote the interdependence of any one literary text on or inter relationship with all those that have gone before it. It implies that a text is just a mosaic of quotations. Texts absorb and transform one another’ (Marathe et al 154)

It is true that literary artists cannot escape the influence of their predecessors. The concept of intertextuality has been put to constant use in the Indian literary tradition. It has been a technique of comparison and commentary in Indian poetics. The west has recognized this concept centuries later and has theorized an ancient Indian literary practice. In India the influence of Vyasa, Valmiki and Kalidasa on successive generations of writers is tremendous. Similarly Homer, Virgil and Seneca have wielded great influence on English writers. Among the English writers, Spenser has influenced Milton, Marlowe’s plays bear the influence of Seneca. Eliot’s poetry reveals the influence of both western and Indian literary traditions. A study of influences and parallels is in fact a branch of comparative literature, a discipline by itself.

Influence could be at different levels thematic, structural, stylistic and so on. Several writers have retold the earlier works from different points of view. The theme of the Mahabharata has been the nucleus around which poems, plays and novels have been built up. Among the contemporary works Arjun by Sunil Gangopadyay is a novel that artistically exploits the theme.
of the *Mahabharata*. Peter Brooks has dramatised the epic. In the Indian literary tradition itself, it has a strong impact on the writers. A novelist like Raja Rao has creatively adopted the Puranic tradition of story telling in his novel *Kanthapura*. Several ancient myths have been the source of many literary works. But the re-renderings of the Indian epics—both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*—are not born out of the burden of anxiety. Influence in these cases is different from Bloom's concept of anxiety. It is a deliberate, conscious effort at adapting the earlier works to a different context. The works chosen for the present study are also deliberate reworking of the epic *Mahabharata* to comment on the contemporary situation. These writers have consciously established links with the epic in terms of form, content and narrative technique.

The concept of intertextuality has been promoted by several writers with variations. Harold Bloom and Julia Christeva have used the term to show the interdependence of literary texts and a network of textual relations. Poststructuralists have used the term to disrupt notions of stable meaning and objective interpretation. Graham Allen in his Critical Idiom Series on *Intertextuality* points out that Barthes uses the term to challenge long-held assumptions concerning the role of the author in the production of meaning (3). Raman Selden, giving a critique of poststructuralism, refers to Barthes's essay *S/Z* (1970) and says that Barthes rejects the myth of uncovering the structure of a text because each text possesses a "difference". Each text refers back differently to the infinite sea of the already written (78). The reader is capable of
producing multiple meaning. As Selden Raman says "The I which reads is already itself a plurality of other texts" (78)

It is true of the Indian epic that each text refers back to the infinite sea of the already written as it contains the essence of the Vedas and the Upanishads and it can be equally applied to the reworkings of the epic too. The reader's potential of plurality of texts is borne out by the fact that every reader is inspired to take on the role of the writer to provide fresh creative insights into the epic. In this context the earliest title of the epic Jaya celebrating the victory at Kurukshetra can be considered as an elaborate metaphor. Kuru in Sanskrit means to do / make / create and Kshetra can mean the place / body / mind. As an extended metaphor it implies that the concept of victory is relative and is perceived by the mind. Milton in his Paradise Lost echoes this idea when he says that "The mind is its own place and in itself / Can make heaven of hell and a hell of heaven" (I: 254-5).

In this context it is appropriate to quote Vanasree Tripathi's remark on the nature of the epic Mahabharatha. She says in her "Polysemy at the Dead End" that the Mahabharata is an infinitely scriptible text (Pathak 116). The great epic of India lends itself to as many interpretations as there are readers. This observation finds echoes in Barthes's distinction between readerly and writerly texts. According to Barthes, if the text discourages the reader to produce his own meaning, then it is a closed text. Such a text makes the reader a consumer and the text that encourages the reader to bring out multiple meanings makes him a producer. The former is
called a readerly / lisible text and the latter is called a writerly / scriptible text. According to Roland Barthes, an ideal text is “a galaxy of signifiers” (Selden 78). Such concepts are not new to the critics of the Mahabharata. M F Salat refers to an observation by V.S. Sukthankar on the richness of the epic that it is one of the most inspiring monuments of the world and an inexhaustible mine for the investigation of the religion, mythology, legend, philosophy, law, custom and political and social institutions of India (127).

The idea of multiple meanings is suggestive of comparison with poststructuralist concept of meaning and the role of the author. It is Roland Barthes who asserted the autonomy of the literary text in “The Death of the Author”. He says that a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author (Rice and Waugh 118). Barthes’s ideas of the text, author and meaning are further strengthened by Derrida’s discussion on the reading of a text. Kathleen Wheeler and C.T. Indra in Explaining Deconstruction observe that Derrida’s writing indicates the necessity for a thoroughly self-conscious reading, one that subjects its own assumptions to close scrutiny, not just the presumed text. In so doing, not only is reading itself (as traditionally conceived) subverted, the concept of the text along with traditional readings is also subverted. Contradictory readings are shown always to inhabit a single text, thereby deflecting the goal in traditional reading, of closure, univocal meaning and truth (1).
Deconstruction can be seen to work within the body of traditional criticisms itself. The text has inherent unresolvability which leads to a body of interpretation growing around it. This received opinion can be utilized to point out the inconsistencies and contradictions in the text itself deconstructing it.

The poststructuralist’s preoccupation with reading has opened up new avenues of criticism and interpretation. Geoffrey Hartman in *Criticism in the Wilderness* points out the new approaches of criticism such as revision, reinterpretation and rewriting. Hartman denies that criticism reveals any absolute knowledge, but only the nature of the text as infinite, undecidable and interminable – a web of texts, intertexts and interpretations – the harder we try to interpret or decode a text, the more indeterminate it becomes (Wheeler & Indra 7). Such a view explains the status of the *Mahabharata* as an inexhaustible mine of literary richness unfolding infinite possibilities of interpretations.

The radical departure from traditional criticism is further reinforced by Derrida’s concept of deconstruction. Wheeler & Indra rightly point out that Derrida devised new tactics which were aimed at challenging traditional methods and practices in literary criticism and in philosophy (3). He challenged the accepted borders between philosophy, history, literature, criticism, autobiography, sociology and so on, mixing genres styles and themes (33). Such a strategy of mixing disciplines and genres is true of Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*, where the novelist cuts across the borders between
history and literature and also mixes the two different genres, the epic and fiction, by superimposing the structure of the epic on his satirical fiction.

Raman Selden in Practising, Theory And Reading Literature An Introduction says that Derrida takes upon himself to show how impossible it is for us to escape the differential nature of language or to extricate ourselves from the "aporias" of discourse, that is, the undecidable flow and counterflow of all signification (68). This principle of undecidability and indeterminacy of signification, underlies Tharoor's concept of history in his The Great Indian Novel.

The early phase of poststructuralism according to Peter Barry, seems to license, and revel in the endless freeplay of meanings and the escape from all forms of textual authority. In his review of "Poststructuralism and De-construction", Peter Barry observes that Derrida sees in modern times a particular intellectual event which constitutes a radical break from past ways of thought. He says, "the event concerns the decentring of our intellectual universe. Prior to this event the existence of a norm or centre in all things was taken for granted" (66). He adds further that all along western norms of dress, behaviour, architecture, intellectual outlook have provided a firm centre against which deviations, aberrations variations could be detected and identified as 'Other' and marginal. In the twentieth century, however "these centres were destroyed or eroded, sometimes this was caused by historical events - such as the way the First World War destroyed the illusion of steady material progress [...]" (67)
The poststructuralist concepts such as the death of the author, the endless freeplay of meanings and the freedom from textual authority are evidently seen to be at work in the numerous attempts to retell the classics of world literature. The two great Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have been exerting great influence, on the writers, as a living tradition.

The process of decentering of the structure involves a reversal of the binary oppositions forming the metaphysical framework of Western thought—such as soul-body, being - non being, good-bad, content - form, speech-writing, masculine - feminine and so on. Raman Selden says that the deconstructor proceeds by reversing the hierarchy, not perversely but by discerning a chink in the discourse which allows this reversal. Finally, the newly asserted hierarchy is itself displaced and is not allowed to install a new truth or structural fixity (89).

Shashi Tharoor seems to admit the fact that his own text might be displaced when he says, at the end of the novel that he might have told the story "from a completely mistaken perspective" and that he "must retell it" (418). If the reversal of the binary oppositions victor / victim is seen to be at work in Tharoor's deconstruction of the epic and history, the newly asserted hierarchy is likely to undergo a similar process. Derrida himself does not rule out the possibility of thinking outside such terms in his "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" (Sethuraman 294). Derrida has coined the term "differance" to convey the deferral nature of meaning. As Peter Barry says, texts previously regarded as unified artistic artefacts are shown to be
fragmented, self divided, and centreless. They always turn out to be representative of ‘monstrous births predicted at the end of “Structure Sign and Play” (68). The notion of monstrous births or rebirths of a text is the operating principle of several creative insights into the *Mahabharata*

According to Wheeler and Indra, Derrida and Barthes were to a large extent engaged in a mode of writing that was structurally, stylistically, generically, thematically and academically a genuine rupture with tradition (41). This concept of rupture with tradition or breaking away from tradition is the creative principle of the three primary texts chosen for study, that seem to retell the story of the *Mahabharata* from a non-traditional perspective by fictionalising the epic. Bhyrappa's *Parva* seems to reverse the binary opposition of the terms the sacred and the secular by reinterpreting the events and the characters through the device of demythologising. Pratibha Ray in *Yajnaseni* presents the story of the epic from the point of view of Draupadi taking up the cause of the women and the oppressed who have been so long marginalised in the society. Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* fictionalises the epic reversing the hierarchy of the victor-victim in both the epic and history, ultimately making the novel a political satire.

Tharoor draws significant parallels between the ancient epic and modern Indian history in terms of events and characters. The two different disciplines, literature and history, co-exist and interact with each other as two texts. The reader is provided a parallel reading of the two texts enabling him to interrogate the past. Such a parallel existence of the two
texts with equal weightage informing and interrogating each other is suggestive of a new historicist approach challenging a conservative assessment of both the epic and history.

Shashi Tharoor's investigations and interrogations of history and the epic presuppose a kind of skepticism involved in the popular conceptions of both history and the epic. It is possible to interpret the novel from the perspective of postmodernism strengthened by deconstruction.

The views of the poststructuralists seem to overlap the concerns of the postmodernists. They not merely overlap but seem to mutually strengthen each other. It will be useful to briefly study the salient features of postmodernism. Postmodernism is basically an attempt at redefining cultural discourses by asserting the need to recall the past to highlight it and subvert it. Referring to the theory of postmodernism in The Politics of Postmodernism Lynda Hutcheon says that in general terms it takes the form of self-conscious self-contradictory and self-underming statement (1) Postmodernism is both a continuation and a contradiction of modernism.

In the same way the novels chosen for the study can be seen as both a continuation and a contradiction of the original epic. There is a blurring of distinction between the sacred and the secular, the victor and the victim, high art and low art in these works. The body of literature arising out of the great epic The Mahabharata seems to interrogate the past. The texts interacting with each other have obliterated all the boundaries of hierarchical terms.
Referring to the relationship between poststructuralism and postmodernism Raman Selden says that "despite the diversity of trends within each, there is no doubt that poststructuralist thought is to some extent a body of reflections upon the same issues which concern postmodern culture as understood by critics such as Ihab Hassan, Jean Francois Lyotard, Frederic Jameson and Gerald Graff" (72) He says that the postmodern experience stems from a profound sense of ontological uncertainty He claims, that the questioning of all depth models, the decentering of the world and the self, the rejection of elitist aesthetics and experimental formalisms, the disruption of all discursive boundaries, the obliteration of the frontiers between high culture and low culture and between art and commodity and the resistance to meaning and interpretation, are all themes of poststructuralism (Ibid)

It is true that there is a resistance to meaning as a plurality of vision marks the writings of the authors chosen for study and many more creative re-renderings of the Mahabharata

The vivid portrayal of the scenes of death and decay, multiple voices moaning and groaning, overlapping and intersecting each other, utter chaos and gloom prevailing over and above a mood of jubilation in the victor's camp, all left with a sense of waste towards the end in Bhyrappa’s Parva are all of great significance for a society torn asunder by two world wars. The novel strikes a postmodern note at the end. Contemporary fiction best reflects contemporary reality. Cultural historians point out profound links between the nuclear threat of the technologically advanced world and the global phenomenon of fragmented
The distinction between high culture and low culture is wiped out leading to the hegemony of commercial culture. Peter Barry says that the modernist laments fragmentations whilst the postmodernist celebrates it (84) A plurality of vision marks the writings of the postmodernists.

Post modernists encourage free mixing of literary genres and highlight texts of hybridity. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* fits the description of a hybrid text, a typical postmodern novel which works to foreground the totalizing impulse of western imperialistic modes of history-writing by confronting it with indigenous Indian models of History (Hutcheon 65) Rushdie seems to be the influence behind *The Great Indian Novel* of Tharoor Influence of the predecessor poet is evident in all revisionist works. Sethuraman asserts that a novel like *The Great Indian Novel* could only have been written after the deconstructive turn that rhetorical critical discourse has taken since Derrida (31) Besides Derrida’s theory, other influences are at work in Tharoor's novel, but yet Tharoor's novel cannot be called imitative or derivative of the predecessor artists Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* says that “poetic influence need not make poets less original as often it makes them more original, though not therefore necessarily better” (7). Tharoor's creative use of the technique makes him more original than his predecessor.

In the process of fictionalising the epic, the Indian writers consciously mix the Eastern and Western literary tradition Bhyrappa claims that he adopts the stream of consciousness technique in his *Parva* to explore the psyche of some of the major characters. But there seems to be a great deal of difference
between Joycean use of the device and Bhyrappa's conscious employment of the same device. In Joyce the stream of consciousness refers to the illogical sequence of thoughts flowing from the mind of the individual. Bhyrappa has oversimplified the term to refer to the reminiscences and recollection of a character which are identified with the technique of flashback narration. However, the employment of certain artistic strategies (like grafting from traditions that are diametrically opposed to each other) creates an impression of hybridity. According to what Mark Currie states in Post modern Narrative Theory, narratological theory itself has undergone a transition in the 1980s. The transition implies the significance of the active role of the reader.

The issues raised by the poststructuralists are by no means new to the body of criticism on Mahabharata. In fact, the epic Mahabharata itself has raised crucial questions on the role of the author, about the content whether it is history or myth or legend, whether or not Vyasa was a poet or a witness to history, to what extent Vyasa has fictionalised history and how authentic the text of Vyasa is. The encyclopaedic nature of the epic leaves the critic bewildered and no conclusions have been arrived at in answer to these issues. By and large the basic situation and the major characters involved in it are accepted by a majority of writers who have attempted retelling, revisioning or fictionalising the epic. But the writers by their ingenuity and imagination have given a new thrust to the events or have chosen to reinterpret the characters from a new perspective in conformity with the times.
The women characters of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been a source of perennial interest to the creative artists. The characters of Sita, Savitri, Gandhari and Draupadi are as important as those of the heroes in the epics. Therefore, the writers have found it a rewarding experience to interpret and reinterpret these women characters from a feminist perspective in their works. The lives of Sita, Gandari and Draupadi raise certain vital issues that are relevant to the twentieth century women. Yajnaseni of Pratibha Ray expresses serious concerns about the discrimination of women in the society. While fictionalising the predicament of Draupadi from a twentieth century perspective, the novelist tries to expose the injustice and inequality to which women have been subjected for a long time. The issues raised by the novelist invite comparison with the preoccupations of the feminists.

Feminist movement in India is an offshoot of western feminism though it started as a suffrage movement in the west. Feminists realised there were greater issues than gaining the vote. According to western feminists, women are oppressed by the patriarchal culture. Pam Marris in Literature and feminism defines feminism as "a political perception based on two fundamental premises: (1) that gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systematic social injustice and (2) that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. This perception provides feminism with its double agenda to understand the social and psychic mechanisms, that construct and perpetuate gender inequality, and then to
change them"(1). Virginia Woolf is generally considered to be the founding mother of feminist theory. Much before Woolf, Henrik Ibsen had championed the cause of women in his A Dolls House. Woolf's critical treatise, A Room of ones' own, exposes the deplorable conditions under which women live and suffer. Women have been denied certain basic rights such as freedom, education and economic independence in a patriarchal society.

Pratibha Ray's Yajnaseni raised the vexed issue of her not being given the freedom to have her say with regard to her marriage with the Pandava brothers. She is annoyed that she is expected to conform to the wishes of Yudhishtir and his brothers. Yajnaseni's furious outbursts are a craving for the freedom of the woman as an individual.

In A Room of ones own Virginia Woolf puts forth the idea that women have been the victims of a male-dominated society and they have perpetually to act as the looking glass for men to reflect their notions of women. Woolf says, "women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking glass shrinks" (37). Virginia woolf has also highlighted the difficulties faced by women creative artists. But it is interesting enough to note that she expresses an androgynous vision of creativity.

Pratibha Ray's Yajnaseni has none of the inhibitions about expressing female passion. She does not conceal her passion for Arjun. Such a depiction
seems to bear similarity to Woolf's opinion expressed in *Professions for Women* where she refers to the "taboo about expressing female passion. The attempts to write about the experiences of women therefore were aimed at discovering linguistic ways of describing the contrived life of women and she believed that when women finally achieved social and economic equality with men, there would be nothing to prevent them from freely developing their artistic talents" (Selden 209)

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* has made significant contribution to feminist theory. She points out the narrow, prejudiced definitions of a woman as a womb, an ovary an object or as the other in relation to man in her very first chapter (36). Her contention is that women have been biologically, psychologically and economically discriminated against. She says that she conceives woman as hesitating between the role of object, 'the other' which is offered her and the assertion of her liberty (83). She insists that a woman be defined as a human being in quest of values in a world of values, a world in which it is indispensable to know the economic and social structure (83). Yajnaseni protests against woman treated as a commodity "Is woman a part of immovable property"?, (235). This question of identity is dealt with by several other feminists such as Betty Friedan and Kate Millet.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) also highlights the conditions of oppressed women and sees the majority of women trapped in domestic chores. Mirian Schnir in *The Vintage Book of feminism* says that Betty Friedan identified the problem of women as the problem of identity, which
lay buried and unspoken for many years. (49) Referring to the lack of awareness of American Women about their own problems, Friedan says “their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers[ ] they glowed in their role as women” (53).

Dale Spender’s “Man Made Language” obviously suggests that women were oppressed by even language that is dominated by men. Hardly is there any reference to linguistic bias against women in the Indian context where social and cultural issues form the debates about the status of women. The practice of male domination based on sexuality is emphatically denounced by Kate Millet in her ‘Sexual Politics’. She analyses a few passages from Jean Genet’s works and observes, "Sex is deep at the heart of our troubles. Genet is urging and unless we eliminate the most pernicious of our systems of oppression, unless we go to the very center of the sexual politic and its sick delirium of power and violence, all our efforts at liberation will only land us again in the same primordial stews (Schneir 144) Millet squarely puts the blame on patriarchal culture.

In this context it is worth considering Krishna Chaitanya’s observation of Karna’s comment on Draupadi.

Draupadi’s situation never ceased to intrigue Karna. He really seems to have felt that she had a phenomenal libido though, when he said in the Kaurava assembly that she could now find fulfillment with a hundred husbands, he was being extremely ungenerous. But Karna, here, may have been cherishing some animosity, (146)
It is evident here that the epic throws some hints about the aspect of sexuality and that the epic heroine proves her domination over men based on sexuality, a kind of refutation of male superiority over the female. Karna seems to be having what Mary Woolstonecraft calls ‘mistaken notions of beauty and female excellence’ (Schneir 14) Schnier calls Woolstonecraft’s “A Vindication of the Rights of woman” an epoch making call-to-arms as early as 1792 itself (Schneir XVI) Woolstonecraft raised the consciousness of women by saying ‘If [ ] (women) be really capable of acting like rational creatures, let them not be treated like slaves; or like the brutes who are dependent on the reason of man, when they associate with him’ (12). Mary Woolstonecraft and Betty Friedan belong to the group of Liberal feminists who demand equality of civil liberties for women and equal opportunities.

Some of the statements attributed to Shakuni and Bhīm in Pratibha Rays’ Yajnaseni seem to deny equality to women. Shakuni says that the greatest sin of a woman is to try to be learned. Bhīm wants woman to be ‘obedient’ to her husband. But Shakuni comes to stay in the palace of Hastinapura in order to protect his sister Gandhari. Bhīm devotes himself to protecting the honour of Draupadī whenever there was a threat to her modesty from lustful men. The statements of Shakuni and Bhīm are not born out of any conviction but are the outbursts of prejudice against the rival party or temperamental misdemeanour.
Marxist feminists believe that class distinctions and patrilineal inheritance rights are the causes of discrimination against women. Shulamith Firestone in “The Dialectic of Sex; The Case for feminist Revolution” sees class struggle itself as the consequence of an oppressive biological condition (Schneir 256).

Though class struggles exist in India there is an increasing awareness of the importance of economic independence to a woman. In India, the Hindu Succession Act concedes women equal rights but the inclusion of the provision, allowing a person to will away to anyone’s favour he prefers enables fathers to deny these rights to their daughters. But the works chosen for study do not deal with Marxist Feminism or gynocriticism.

Feminists also examine the problem of women’s writing and Gynocriticism. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in The Mad Woman in the Attic and Elain Showalter in A Literature of Their own analyze the writings of women and bring out the differences from the point of view of women’s experience.

Yet another approach to the study of the discrimination against women is the psychoanalytic method. Bhyrappa seems to explore the psyche of some of the women characters of the Mahabharata and his imaginative comprehension of their psyche throws light on the marital unhappiness of these women. This has been exclusively dealt with in the chapter on Parva. Psychoanalytic critics are influenced by the theories of Freud. French feminists such as Julia Christeva and Helene Cixous discuss the relationship between female sexuality and literary productivity. They also disapprove of the situation of woman being relegated to the background as the Other.
African-American and Third world feminists such as Alice Walker and Barbara Johnson are deeply concerned with the problem of identity complicated by race and sexuality.

It is obvious that the issues raised by many of the western feminists relate to identity, gender bias, denial of equal opportunities, language based oppression discrimination on the basis of biological differences, aggravated by class and racial distinction. These feminists also highlight the problems of women creative writers.

But the Indian situation is different. A historical perspective of the position of women in India gives an ideal picture of their status. Even in the ancient Vedic society men and women played complementary roles. In the performance of any ritual or religious ceremony a man cannot begin anything until the woman lights the fire. An Indian woman is not merely a wife of a man but his friend and advisor; while nursing him she becomes even a mother to him. But it has been often said that a woman is a dependent on man throughout her life. Since a woman is biologically vulnerable to assaults on her modesty, she needs the kind of protection from men.

If the spirit of an ideal is missed or ignored then the system promoting such an ideal starts degenerating. In India all the well-meaning practices have been abused and the security of women was threatened with the invasion of Moghuls followed by the advent of the British. To cite an example, Varnasrama dharma recognised and respected the aptitude of the individual for a particular
vocation and this was abused in the later day as an evil, perpetrating caste distinctions. The dowry system originated as a compensation for denial of inheritance rights to women; in course of time it degenerated into a social evil.

Though women's issues have been foregrounded in the twentieth Century India, the outlook of Indian women is basically different from that of the Western women. Family is a strong unit in Indian society and the sanctity of marriage is accepted in principle by the majority of Indian women. Welfare of the family is the uppermost ideal for a woman who has willingly effaced her 'self' in larger interests. It is necessary to consider the views of Madhu Kishwar on the differences between Indian and Western feminism. In her essay "A horror of isms Why I do not call myself a feminist" she says that Western feminism is an offshoot of individualism and liberalism:

In India most of us find it difficult to tune in to the extreme individualism that comes to us through feminism. For instance, most women here are unwilling to assert their rights in a way that estranges them not just from their family but also from their larger kinship group as community. They want to ensure that their rights are respected and acknowledged by their family and prefer to avoid asserting their rights in a way that isolates them from those they consider their own. This need not be interpreted as a sign of mental slavery to social opinion. Rather it is an indication that for many of us life is a poor thing if
our freedom inevitably cuts us off from our interdependence with others. In our culture both men and women are taught to value the interests of our families and not make our lives revolve around individual self-interest (272-3).

Though Western feminism is different from Indian feminism on conceptual basis nevertheless its impact is felt in India. Women dare to question the acts of injustice and oppression perpetrated on them and their fellow beings. Gender based discrimination, social oppression, and tyranny make women interrogate the past to find solutions to the present. The ideal role models in the ancient epics and puranas have inspired many a woman and they have become archetypes. The present change in the perspective makes women reassess the archetypal figures such as Sita, Savithri, Kunti and Gandhari. The lives of the ideal wives and ideal mothers make them rethink of the values of such a self-effacing womanhood. Sita's Agnipariksha is interpreted in terms of male-chauvinism and the need to protest against such a test of chastity is emphasised by the champions of women's cause.

Archetypes have been at the centre of racial consciousness. J A Cuddon in A Dictionary of Literary Terms defines an archetype as follows:

a basic model from which copies are made, therefore a prototype. In general terms, the abstract idea of a class of things which represents the most typical and essential characteristics shared by the class thus a paradigm or exemplar [ ] certain character or personality types have become established as more or less archetypal' (55-6)
Archetypes derive their significance from myths and legends which are rooted in a specific culture. Edward Quin’s definition of the term myth in *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms* brings out the link between the two. He says that the myths are basically stories.

Stories belonging to a specific culture recounting supernatural or paradoxical events designed to reflect the culture’s view of the world. Despite their seemingly endless variety, myths tend to have underlying consistency of action, theme and character. He says that myth stands at the magnetic centre where several disciplines such as anthropology, psychology and philosophy converge (207).

Indian sages and seers have fathomed the depth of the human psyche and by doing so they have delineated several character types which in the western system of epistemology could be called the archetype. Vedic and Upanishadic seers of India seem to have been of the opinion that poetic insight alone enables one to acquire wisdom with which life as it manifests itself can be understood. The poet, says the *Isavasyopanishad*, is self-born (Svayambuh), has absolute control over his mind and reveals things as they are (Yathā - tathyataḥ arthan vidadhātī sāsvatibhyah samābhhyah) Responding to this the sages as well as the poets in ancient India, tried to grasp the fundamentals of life in their infinite variety and projected them on to the mind of posterity. They seem to have made a deep study of each type of character (with reference to its characteristics). Thus one finds in the *Mahabharata*, the hero,
the villain, the sage, the king, the eminent, the low and so on all making a long list of characters who appear again and again evolving as they do along with the evolution of life.

It is the portrayal of characters of this kind especially in *the Mahabharata* and *the Ramayana* that is responsible for their being identified with the members of every family in India. Thus there is always a Shakuni who is responsible for the destruction of an entire family as there is always a Karna who is charity incarnate; and Krishna as a baby is present in every family from Kanyakumari to Kashmir. Therefore Vyasa and Valmiki can be said to have created characters who can in modern critical parlance be described as eternal archetypes.

The three novels taken up for study, not only reinterpret the characters but also interrogate the values signified by the archetypes. In *Parva* Gandhari the archetype of an ideal wife is recast in the modern social context and made to express her inner anguish arising out of being married to a blind king Kunti also has nothing but contempt for her impotent husband.

Kunti and Draupadi in the same novel are also portrayed as miserable women who had unhappy marriages. Pratibha Ray’s *Yajnaseni* reminds the reader of Bharati’s new woman who takes up the cause of justice and equality for women in the society. It is appropriate to quote Chellappan’s views on Indian archetypes. In “Archetypes in Indian Literature” he says, that the myths and legends have shaped and formed the mind and imagination of our people all over the land. “But they were not simply vehicles of conscious meaning and they
have acquired new areas of meaning from time to time and in different places. They are answers to the needs of deepest layers of the collective mind of India and also the metaliterature or the common code of the entire country" (74)

In the *Mahabharata* Karna’s birth is traced to mythic origins. Kunti’s boon from the sage Durvasa to beget children by reciting certain mantras is distorted by Bhyrappa in *Parva*. The episode is recast from a rational point of view and the myth is viewed in terms of human experience bereft of all supernatural quality about it. Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with A Thousand faces* refers to folk stories of virgin motherhood and cites the example of The Buddha descending from heaven to his mother’s womb in the shape of a milk-white elephant. He says, "Any leaf accidentally swallowed, any nut, or even the breath of a breeze, may be enough to fertilize the ready womb. The procreating power is everywhere. And according to the whim or destiny of the hour either a hero, saviour or a world-annihilating demon may be conceived - one can never know (311).

The life of Karna in the epic is an illustration of the later-day-theories of myth regarding the major motifs of the typical life of the hero as identified by Campbell: "Virgin birth, and quest for the father, ordeal, and atonement with the father, the assumption and coronation of the virgin mother and finally, the heavenly triumph of the true sons while the pretenders are heated hot". (312). The technique of demythologising such episodes to throw light on the contemporary issues is discussed in the chapter on *Parva*. Even though individual writer’s treatment of ancient myth sometimes leads to
distortion. The myths cannot be totally destroyed as they are at the centre of racial consciousness. In the twentieth century Carl G. Jung postulated the theory of the *Collective Unconscious*. The collective unconscious is manifested in the recurrence of certain myths and images in literature. In "Psychology and Literature," he says that the poet interprets the contents of the collective unconscious:

The psychological mode deals with the materials drawn from the realm of human consciousness with emotional shocks, the experience of passion and the crises of human destiny in general—all of which go to make up the conscious life of man and his feeling life in particular. This material is psychically assimilated by the poet, raised from the common place to the level of poetic experience and given an expression which forces the reader to greater clarity and depth of human insight by bringing fully into his consciousness what he ordinarily evades and overlooks or senses, only with a feeling of dull discomfort. The poet's work is an interpretation and illumination of the contents of consciousness of the ineluctable experiences of human life with its eternally recurrent sorrow and joy (Lodge 177).

The myth is of crucial importance in literary works. Northrop Frye in *The Archetypes of Literature* says that "the myth is the central informing power that gives archetypal significance to the ritual and archetypal narrative to the oracle. Hence the myth is the archetype, though it might be convenient to say
myth only when referring to narrative and archetype when speaking of significance' (Lodge 429).

The literary artist's handling of the myth necessitates a serious study of the cultural history of the nation Cassirer in his theory of myths points out that myth lays the basis for nationhood. It is behind the feeling of nationality and gives it its force' (Strenski 16). He finds it inconceivable that a nation should exist without mythology (Ibid). Any attempt to distort the myth results in either the resurgence of the myth or the creation of yet another myth. In 'Parva' Narasura is portrayed as a highway robber who was killed by Krishna; Bhishma's mother Ganga is depicted as a member of the hill-tribes, who belong to a matriarchal society where children are the property of the mother. Ganga's disposing of her seven children born to Shantanu are viewed as the prerogative of the mother belonging to that society. In place of the ancient myth of the Vasus who stole the cow of a sage doomed to undergo penance in the earth as Ganga's children, Bhyrappa has introduced a new myth.

These are a few instances in the novel which prove that myths cannot be successfully dispensed with. The archetypal approach to literature combines in itself the formalistic, sociological, anthropological, psychological and historical methods. Wilbur Scott in Five Approaches of Literary Criticism observes that the archetypal approach is "historical in its investigation of a cultural or social past, but nonhistorical in its
demonstration of literature's timeless value, independent of particular periods" (247).

What Scott says of the study of myths is true of the epic, as the study of epic in any nation is necessarily a study of its history. According to du Bois Page, "it is a representation in mixed narration of significant events in the past of a community" (1). Whereas history deals with the particular, the epic deals with the universal. Analysing the relation between history and the epic Page says, "in the epic poem there is an intersection between the fictive life of an individual herd and a vision of a larger history. Thus the lives of individuals and the destiny of the community are fitted into a larger pattern of time." He analyses the art of historiography.

History cannot of course be a pure 'real' account of what has happened - the telling of significant events in a community's past required selection and shaping. Time passes second by second, the historian arranges a version of an account of times passing which interprets events, attributes causation to various factors, foregrounds certain characters in the infinitely varied and chaotic flow of time. His interpretation of the past projects a shape for the future as well (2).

The interconnections between history and the epic or literature in general are reinforced by the New Historicists. The writers who fictionalise the epic are, in fact, dealing with a complex material encompassing a fusion of history and
fiction. **Inevitably the process** involves selection, omission and shaping of events and character. Tharoor not only deals with the history of the epic society but also with the history of a specific period, that is, the history of modern India. The novelist seems to have comprehended the assumptions of the New Historians. These assumptions are summed up by Raman Selden precisely and concisely in his *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, as follows:

There are two meanings of the word 'history' (a) the events of the past and (b) telling a story about the events of the past. Poststructuralist thought makes it clear that history is always 'narrated' and that therefore the first sense is untenable. The past can never be available to us in pure form, but always in the form of representations (105).

In the context of history being viewed as a narrative, in the form of representations Tharoor's questions in the novel regarding the relative significance of the story are relevant: "But to which story shall we return? shall I tell of Karna's dramatic rise to national importance through his dominance of the Muslim Group? Shall I speak, instead, of Gangâji or of Dhritarashtra or should I turn instead to Pandu [...]" (165). History cannot present the absolutes. Tharoor asks, "Is it permissible to modify the truth with a possessive pronoun? At what point in the recollection of truth does wisdom cease to transcend knowledge? How much may one select, interpret and arrange the facts of the living past before truth is jeopardized by inaccuracy" (164).
These observations are further borne out by the contentions of the New Historicists.

Historical periods are not unified entities. There is no single `history', only discontinuous and contradictory `histories'. There was no single Elizabethan world view. The idea of a uniform and harmonious culture is a myth imposed on history and propagated by the ruling classes in their own interests.

Historians can no longer claim that their study of the past is detached and objective. We cannot transcend our own historical situation. The past is not something which confronts us as if it were a physical object, but is something we construct from already written texts of all kinds which we construe in line with our particular historical concerns (Selden 105).

A survey of the literary scene in the eighties and the nineties of twentieth century India shows that there has been a great revival of interest in the epics. To present an exhaustive survey of the re-renderings of the *Mahabharata* will be beyond the scope of the present thesis due to the encyclopedic nature of the growth of the epic. But it is necessary to present a brief review of a few of the significant works among the existing corpus.

As early as 1898 Romesh Chundra Dutt translated select verses of the *Mahabharata* with a motive to preserve the character and spirit of the original. According to R.C. Dutt, "the real facts of the war had been obliterated by age, legendary heroes had become the principal actors and as is invariably the case
in India, the thread of a high moral purpose of the triumph of virtue and the subjugation of vice was woven into the fabric of the great epic (151) R.C.Dutt views the epic as a tale of war and heroism and is impressed by the portraiture of the human character in its calm dignity of strength and repose. He calls the *Mahabharata* the greatest work of imagination that Asia has produced and finds the incidents of the epic very striking and significant. He regrets the unlimited expansion of the work (151). As a condensed version Dutt's *Mahabharata* serves as an introduction to the epic for the English reader but does not provide new insight into the epic.

C.Rajagopalachari’s prose rendering of the *Mahabharata*, translated from its Tamil original into English in 1951, has remained till date the earliest source of inspiration for several writers who have no access to the Sanskrit original. Shashi Tharoor has acknowledged his indebtedness to C.Rajagopalachari for his first hand knowledge of the epic, which helped him in writing *The Great Indian Novel*. No other retelling of the *Mahabharata* has undergone as many, as thirty-nine editions, till date, as Rajaji’s *Mahabharata*.

K.M.Munshi is the first Indian writer to produce an English rendering of the epic in prose, in seven volumes in 1962. He gave the title *Krishnavatara* to the entire work though each volume has a separate subtitle. Munshi seems to have been enthralled by the divinity of Krishna. Munshi has faithfully adhered to the original though he has altered the chronological sequence of the episodes. The work seems to focus more on the glory of Krishna as divinity than on the conflict between the rival groups of the same dynasty to capture power. The prose style of Munshi is simple and direct.
In 1978 R.K.Narayan published his retelling of the epic the *Mahabharata*. Narayan recognises the fact that the authorship is generally attributed to Vyasa "while ninety-nine percent of our public would accept the name and venerate him without question as an immortal, inspired sage, research minded scholars have their own doubts and speculations" (8). He prefers to accept the traditional account of Vyasa as the author of *Mahabharata*. In his "Introduction" R.K.Narayan states that his preference is the story although the epic is a treasurehouse of varied interests. He is struck by the well-defined characters who talk an act with robustness and zest (11). He claims that he has not omitted any of the significant episodes relevant to the destinies of the chief characters and has kept himself to the mainstream (12) Narayan's *Mahabharata* is yet another attempt at retelling the story by keeping to the original version of Vyasa. What is remarkable is the lucid style of Narayan that makes the work a delightful reading. The perspective that emerges from his retelling is in harmony with the traditional perspective.

Narayan's version ends with the coronation of Yudhishthir. In the epilogue R.K.Narayan states that "the writer of the epic has a disinclination to conclude a story. Just as all the action seems to be ending, one suddenly realises that the last line is only the beginning of a new phase of the narrative, of fresh thoughts and experience. There is a reluctance to close the subject. This may be one way of creating a semblance of life itself, which is apparently endless. Nothing is ever really conclusive. More than a decade later Tharoor echoes the opinion of RK Narayan when he refuses to conclude his story saying
that stories never end and that he may have to retell the story again. RK Narayan's consummate skill of story-telling sustains the interest of the reader providing him with glimpses of the vitality of the timeless epic.

Summing up the literary activities in 1980s Pradip Bhattacharya says, in his 'Introduction' to the *Battle of Kurukshtetra*, that the eighties have been overwhelmingly the decade of the resurgence of myth. He finds in the postindependence India very few works to captivate the imagination of the reader. After K.M.Munshi's novels he finds only Buddhadeva Bose's reinterpretation of the episodes of the epic significant. According to him, Peter Brook's dramatisation of the epic on the International scene is a reassertion of the epic's universality. He finds the 80s marked by great creative endeavours:

In the eighties, suddenly, the literary scene, as a matter of fact, the best seller market came throbbingly alive with a series of 12 novels in Hindi by Ram Kumar Bhramar In Bengali came the spate of Dipak Chandra's and Kalkut's novels on both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* radically challenging our traditional points of view. In Oriya Pratibha Ray spoke for Draupdi in her novel of that name; in Marathi it was Shivaji Sawant writing Karna's autobiography the massive *Mntyunjaya*. In Kannada the tears, sweat, blood and mire of Kurukshtetra were brought frighteningly alive by S.L.Bhyrappa's *Parva*. On the Bengali stage the agony of Draupadi husbandless though with five husbands was
unforgettably brought home to entranced audiences in Shaoli
Mitra's one-woman performance (16).

In 1987 Maggi Lidchi Grassi’s *The Battle of Kurukshetra* appeared. She retells the story of the epic through the characters of Ashwatthama and Arjun. Maggi Lidchi Grassi portrays the conflict between the two families of the Kuru dynasty reaching the catastrophic depths at the battle of Kurukshetra. Through a probing of the psyche of the protagonists, she brings out the conflict raging in the minds of Arjuna and Ashwatthama. She views the inner anguish experienced by these characters as a kind of existential angst suffered by man in the twentieth century. She raises some very pertinent questions about Bhishma’s silence during crucial moments, such as Pandu’s exile, Gandharli’s blind-folding and Draupadi’s disrobing. She seems to suggest that Bhishma’s dharma is an outdated dharma as he was blinded by the splendour of his own renunciation.

As Pradip Bhattacharya suggests, Maggie Lidchi Grassi’s unique quality lies in her ability to plumb these chinks in this superman’s armour (20). It is his sense of failure that makes him advise Yudhishthir to follow a different dharma, the dharma of a king to rule and not, abdicate the throne. By making Arjuna’s quest, the quest of every individual at the threshold of the twenty-first century, she tries to relate the epic to the contemporary society.

The second volume of her trilogy is entitled *The Legs of the Tortoise* (1996). The significance of the title can be traced back to Bhishma’s advice to
Yudhishthira: "When desire comes be as the tortoise; pull in your consciousness [...] nothing enslaves you more than desire". This volume vividly depicts Yuddha Parva, beginning with the conflict of Arjuna. Krishna's counselling of Arjuna which forms the content of Bhagavad Gita finds a poetic rendering in this novel. The tale of death and devastation is probed into with psychological insights. Grassi asserts that the end of the war marks the beginning of a new era when victors avoid celebration of their triumphs, but rather undergo a sort of spiritual transformation. Yudhishthir in the novel says, "After victory there are celebrations; today there is no victory. We are the sons of uncle Dhritarashtra mourning his sons, our brothers. Our wounds are green. It is a time for forgiveness and healing" (223).

Arjuna prepares himself to perform the Ashwamedha. But it will be different from the traditional Ashwamedha. The novelist gives a new interpretation to the Yajna. "The Ashwamedha is the way devised by man and blessed by gods to bring all our countries under one Emperor. It brings to all, wealth and stability. Gods shower down their blessings on a peaceful land. In times gone past the sacred horse was followed by an army and when it was opposed blood spilled over the issue" (227) Yudhishthir is in no mood to rejoice over his victory as it leaves him with a sense of disillusionment: "Arjuna, I feel that the gods have taken those they chose. We are the prasad nobody wants" (235). The aftermath of war is marked by a strong call for peace.

"The earth wants peace" she said. "The earth has drunk the sacrifice of blood. She needs no more. She cannot take more blood" (318). Grassi has
conceptualised peace as the outcome of the conquest of the self, an inner battle fought by the individual.

Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjaya*, published in 1989, translated from the Marathi original into English by P.Lal, is yet, another recreation of *Mahabharata* from Karna's point of view. The novel is an autobiography of Karna projecting him as a tragic hero, a victim of the circumstances. Sawant attempts to probe the inner psyche of Karna by experimenting with narrative techniques. The novel contains nine books in first person narrative alternatingly given to Karna, Kunthi, Duryodhana, Shon his brother, Vrishali his wife and Krishna. His life is viewed in terms of his relationship with his mother, his brother, his wife and his friend. All the acts of heroism were inspired by the motifs of love, friendship and gratitude. Karna, rising from death to address the readers of the twentieth century, reveals the relevance of his life to the contemporary society. He reviews his entire life as a life of alienation marked by a quest for identity which in turn is a quest for the meaning of life itself.

Sawant gives the reader a poetic rendering of the epic, with evocative images. The images of cuckoo - kokila, the chariot meant to be drawn by six horses, with only five horses yoked to it, are a few examples of the poetic treatment of Karna's predicament. Karna expresses his anguish at being derided as the charioteer's son. There are a few deviations from Vyasa's epic for example it is not Bhishma who arranges the marriage of Madri to Pandu but Pandu himself brings Madri home returning from his conquests. Karna's wife Vrishali emerges as a typical self-effacing Indian wife who commits Sati for an
eternal union with her husband. The novelist does not seem to interrogate the values of an obsolete system which encouraged women to practise 'Sati'. But he vehemently opposes any kind of discrimination based on caste / community by projecting Karna as a victim of social ostracism.

Sawant modifies Vyasa's epic to suit his own purpose. Vrishali and Supriya the wives of Karna are all his poetic creations. He omits those episodes in which Karna becomes the loser, as seen in the episode of Drona's disciples attacking Panchala. Sawant selects those incidents alone which enhance the heroic image of Karna. In his zest to portray Karna as the beloved of all, Sawant makes even Draupadi yearn to become Karna's wife, which is inconsistent with the portrayal of Vyasa's Draupadi. In the game of dice Sawant's Karna is torn between his eagerness to rush to her rescue and his burning revenge for her disdain during her Svayamvara.

Sawant gives no conclusions to the quest of Karna. Pradip Bhattacharya in P.Lal's Vyasa's Mahabharata: Creative Insights says, "that uncertainty, that refusal of Sawant to provide the final answer resolving the multiple riddles faced by us in and through the persona of Karna, is precisely the feature which lifts their work far above the run of the mill best seller" (81).

In 1992 appeared M.M Thakur's Thus spake Bhīṣma. The novel is a significant contribution to the Mahabharata literature as the point of view changes, in this work in English. Novelists in the nineties have chosen to re-render the epic from the point of view of a major character. The Pitamaha of
the epic, Bhishma is at the centre of the narrative in the first person. In his
death-bed of arrows Bhisma recalls the entire story of the epic. His
reminiscences are also a simultaneous reassessment of his involvement in the
dynastic rule of the Kuru family. In the very beginning Bhishma divests himself
of the legendary glory of being greeted by showers of heavenly flowers when he
took the vow of celibacy. He says,' I must admit that I neither saw nor heard
anything of the sort' (18).

The demythologising trend is perceptible throughout the narrative
Bhishma expresses his regrets over his acts of injustice to many a woman in the
story and tries to wipe out any trace of heroism surrounding these acts
Referring to the wrong done to Amba, he says, “considering what my action or
lack of it did to her life, what Sikhandin did to me was perfectly just Indeed, if I
owe my final freedom to anyone apart from Krishna I owe it to Amba turned
Sikhandin” (30).

There are some minor deviations from Vyasa’s epic such as Shakuni
arranging more Gandharis from his country for Dhritarashtra to have children
outnumbering Pandu's, Draupadi spending a month with each of her husbands
for all practical convenience. Thakur’s Bhishma dismisses the episode of
Duryodhana poisoning Bhim’s food or pushing him into the river as mere
concocted stories. He seems to project Duryodhana as not so malicious as he is
traditionally believed to be. He expresses his sympathy for Duryodhana when
he was reported to be ridiculed by the woman of the House-of-All at
Indraprastha.
It is a significant point to note that Thakur's Bhishma admits to "shirking the duty of judging between right and wrong leaving it all to the person concerned, Yudhishthira himself, when Draupadi raised a question of propriety in the Kuru Sabha. After the experience of war Bhishma says that he has woken up to the "utter folly of the life that I have lived out, life that has passed so irretrievably beyond my control that even to regret it would be to add one more act of folly I have already let loose upon my time" (175) The novel presents an altogether new perspective to the epic by making Bhishma remorse stricken and view his life in retrospection as a miserable failure

Vyasa's epic itself contains hints that give scope for such interpretations. For instance, his silence in the Kuru-Sabha, when Draupadi was disrobed by Duhshasan, has puzzled many a reader. Amba's self-immolation is also viewed generally as the outcome of Bhishma's hasty action of carrying off the princesses of Kashi, misleading them into the belief he was carrying them off for himself. The princesses were left to wonder whether he was going to break the vow of celibacy. The epic raises several such issues of morality

M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Second Turn* was first published in English in 1997. Though the original Malayalam version came out as early as 1977 the translation of the novel into English by K Ravindranath came out twenty years later. The author has not altered the framework of the stories put together by Vyasa but claims that he has creatively exploited the silences in the original. The story is narrated in the first person from Bhima's point of view. According to the novelist Vyasa indicates that Yudhishthira is Vidura's son when
Dhritarashtra mourns the latter's death. Such instances of Vyasa leaving significant pauses give ample scope to the reader to interpret the silences. In the epic Bhima is known for his gluttony, physical strength and courage to subdue his enemies. The epic tradition never endows him with a mind of his own but stresses his physicality.

V.C. Harris in his "Introduction" to the novel says "To wrest this huge mass of body out of the epic tradition endowing him with a raging mind and a tormented spirit and ultimately reading the whole of Mahabharata through this angle of vision - this is no mean achievement (x). Bhima emerges as the only caring husband of Draupadi, with tremendous amount of love and loyalty. It is he who honours every little whim and fancy of Draupadi and remains her protector till the end; it is he who comes to her rescue when Jayadradh tries to abduct her or when Kichaka desires her. It is he who turns back to save her when she falls at the foot of the mount Meru when the Pandavas went on their last journey to heaven. Unlike the other Pandavas, Bhim expresses his sympathy for Karna when the latter is humiliated for his low descent.

Gandhari is portrayed as a wronged woman who comes to know of Dhritarashtras' blindness only at the time of her wedding. Duryodhana seems to question the genuineness of Pandavas' Kuru - lineage. Ekalavya's Thumb is cut off by someone when he is asleep. These are a few instances of the novelist's attempts at recasting the events and reinterpretation of characters. V.C. Harris, commends the artistic strategies.
The re-reading / rewriting of the *Mahabharata* also involves a demythification of the epic, a process by which the novel successfully steers clear of all kinds of spiritualist traps that contemporary revisitations of the past often fall into. Indeed the text is so clearly conscious of its own status that at times one hears Bhima talking about the possible ways in which he would be read and talked about by posterity – a narrative / interpretive strategy that helps the text keep a firm hold on its own little ironies and subversive potential (xii).

Apart from these re-renderings of the epic in the mode of fiction there are numerous poems, plays and short stories based on select episodes from the *Mahabharata*. Most of these works are compiled and edited by P Lal in two separate volumes, entitled *Vyasa's Mahabharata: Creative Insights*. The first volume was published by the Writers Workshop in 1992 and the second volume in 1997. P Lal says, in his Preface to the first volume, "To take from the air a live tradition [...] That is what I had in mind when I planned this anthology". His rhetoric asserts the multiplicity of messages in the *Mahabharata* inspiring a humble secondary tribe of adapters, revivers and transcreators. P Lal's two volumes include critiques and book reviews too.

In 1996 Pavan K.Varma published his *Yudhishtar and Draupadi*. It is a poetic narrative based on a particular episode of Yudhistar facing the challenges from Yaksha of the poisoned tank. The narrative brings out the wisdom and diplomacy of Yudhistar in handling a difficult situation and becomes a short
commentary on the nature of life. The episode also throws light on the complex relationship between Yudhishtar and Draupadi since Draupadi is said to have loved Arjun more than any other Pandava. The author has used the episode to comment on the nature of man - woman relationship. Pavan K Varma's work is an instance of creative exploitation of even a small episode from the epic.

A Gujarathi novel entitled *Kurukshetra*, written by Manubhai Pancholi Darshak, needs a special mention in this thesis. The novel has been translated into Hindi and English but not yet published in English. The novel has won the Saraswathi Samaan Award for the year 1997. This novel gives an entirely new perspective to the story of *Mahabharata* by making the central issue a conflict between the races, the Aryans and the Naagas. The ethnic strife is woven around the tale of love between Tapati and Takshaka. Tapati is the daughter of sage Dhaumya, the family priest of the Pandavas and Takshaka is the son of a Naaga King Chitraratha. The Naagas have a genuine grouse against the Pandavas for burning the forests of Khandavapraṣṭha during their exile. Takshaka's mother Chintamani and her brother Vasuki, the ashramites of Dhaumya, advocate unity between the Aryans and the Naagas and they face counter moves from Chitraratha.

The racial conflict is foregrounded in the novel, and all the other events leading to the battle of Kurukshetra are marginalised. The latter part of the novel gives a vivid account of the war and the involvement of Tapati and Takshaka in the opposite campaigns. Tapati's efforts at retrieving the uninhabited land of Khandavavana from the Pandavas to the Naagas signify the move towards
reconciliation and amity between the two races. All the tangles complicating the tender tale of love between Tapait and Takshaka are resolved by Bhishma’s statement, “My stepmother was the daughter of a fisherman, a Matsyakanya in her youth. She became Satyavatee at a later stage. All the social stratifications are merely a part of administrative convenience so that society could function properly. The social laws are not divine ones. They cannot become non-tresspassable” (217).

This unpublished novel in English has great relevance for the contemporary political situation in India, where the Naagas, the Bodos and various tribals demand a recognition of separate state for them. Darshak seems to focus on the mini-Kurukshetras in the lives of different races seeking a separate identity for themselves and the basic right to human dignity, in contemporary India.

Dr. M.S. Rao’s The Great Stones Retold: Ramayana and Mahabharata published in 2000 by Horseshoe publications, UK is the latest retelling of the Mahabharata. Like Tharoor, M.S. Rao also adopts an irreverent tone in the narrative. But Tharoor’s irreverent tone helps him in his political satire whereas Rao’s irreverence is only a device to present the story from the view of modern youth. The use of initials such as D or DP, or AT is a feature of the colloquial idiom of the modern times. Rao has dealt with certain issues of moral importance in his retelling and the work has been well commended for his attempt to explain every nuance and doubt with care and diligence. The Mahabharatha is a text that every age claims for itself and the process of
revisioning and re-discovery continues even today and will continue into the future.

Alongside the creative endeavours there are also critical works and commentaries on the *Mahabharata*. P Lal's two volumes entitled Vyasa's *Mahabharata: Creative Insights* contain poems, plays, short stories, critiques and book reviews on the recreations of the *Mahabharata*. Shashi Tharoor's "The Relevance of the *Mahabharata* in Today's India", in Lal's first volume, spells out the intention of Tharoor to write a political satire using the framework of the epic. *The Mahabharata Revisited* is a Sahitya Akademi publication of the papers presented at the International conference on the *Mahabharata* at New Delhi (1987). This volume contains S L Bhyrappa's "The *Mahabharata* My attempt at Recreation" in which the novelist expresses his determination to limit the epic to a strict human possibility and view it from the twentieth century perspective.

The critical reviews of the primary texts chosen are only a few, since they are recent works by promising contemporary writers. There are no full length studies available on any of the primary texts chosen. The secondary sources are limited to a few critical essays, journal articles and formal interviews given by the novelists to reputed journals.

Among the significant pieces, Pratibha Ray's interview given to Ranavir Rangra in *Indian Literature* reveals her commitment to the oppressed group that includes the women and the tribals. In conversation with Sue Dicman,
in *The Book Review*, Ray makes it clear that the feminist issues in her works are concerned with human rights.

In the following chapters the significant issues dealt with in the primary texts are discussed. In the second chapter, issues relating to revisioning of history by Tharoor in *The Great Indian Novel* are analysed. The next chapter (III) examines the predicament of women and the oppressed group as portrayed by Pratibha Ray in *Yajnaseni*. The fourth chapter is a study of the socio-cultural issues implicit in Bhyrappa's *Parva*. The concluding chapter (V) discusses the common ideology behind the re-renderings of the epic and the contemporary relevance of the epic.