CHAPTER V
MINOR THEMES IN DUNMORE’S NOVELS

5.1 INTRODUCTION:

No doubt, Helen Dunmore who is a poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, reviewer and author of children's fiction has the versatility. Whatever forms Dunmore uses to express her talent, one thing remains pretty constant—an obsession with time. Helen Dunmore has never flinched from writing about pain, deprivation, forbidden loves, and suffering. Dunmore has chosen subjects including child abuse, starvation, and family collapse that are microcosms of the struggle for human and humane survival against terrible odds. She has made powerful connections between the specific story and its larger historic meaning. Dunmore has successfully carried her readership through the horrors of incest, murder and war by means of prose and plot-lines as taut as hawsers. Her preoccupation with time lost reaches a climax in this exploration of bereavement. Where past and present have overlapped in novels, as in *Talking to the Dead*, there has been a conventional narrative to follow, with surprises and twists arising out of a mastery of technique. *Mourning Ruby* is constructed differently. Not only does Rebecca’s story jump about from past to present, sometimes within the space of a paragraph, but her tale contains other, smaller stories, like a Russian doll.

Helen Dunmore’s war novels reveal the major themes such as horror of war siege, fight for survival, food and starvation, betrayal and love and sexuality. Her historical novels render the themes like parenthood and orphanhood, fight for survival, love and sexuality and betrayal. The major themes in her of contemporary settings are fight for survival, love and sexuality, orphanhood and parenthood death and betrayal. The minor themes in all her adult novels are varied in forms. The themes like history and memory, secrets, blood, change, sweetness of life, parenthood, slipped family relations and loss are some of the themes reflected in her adult novels. The present chapter focuses light on the minor themes in her novels.
5.2 HISTORY AND MEMORY:

Dunmore has great fascination of Russia/ Soviet Union and Finland. She loved Finland-its exceptional landscape, rich and unique culture, its extraordinary history and stories of Soviet Union in the winter war and the war of Continuation. This increased her interest in the relationship between Finland and Russia. She was deeply impressed by the lakes, forest and solitudes of Finland and Finish cities. She was struck by the architecture of Leningrad and realized the strong historical links between these two cities. There are typical wooden houses, the country cottages, the saunas. Finns have deep and mystical attachment to the land and nature and the extremes.

In *The Siege*, the action centres on a starving Russian family. There is the same sense being buried by events. Though the family despairs that the Nazi blockade of Stalingrad will end, the Germans will be defeated. It is a perspective that fascinates Dunmore. “I am not writing about history from the mountains of knowledge, from which you can survey the plains of ignorance, because that is a very annoying way of writing,” she says (Dunmore 02). Her use of metaphor is typical. She has the poet’s craving to paint word pictures.

In *The Siege*, there is an almost hour-by-hour account of the terrible blockade of Leningrad by the Germans in 1941. It is a sustained narrative-wonderfully described, of endurance, starvation, love and death through the worst winter in the city’s history. Much of it is seen through the eyes of an intellectual dissident and his daughter. The nightmare of the siege of Leningrad is not now particularly remembered. In *The Siege*, Pavlov is perfectly correct in distributing the food to the citizens. He is writing history, while history writes him. Summers in the country, working in the garden and making homemade jam, are long gone for Anna Levin. She is in a freezing apartment caring for her five-year-old brother, a sick father, and, ironically, her father’s former mistress. In the chaos of it all, Anna has found love for the first time with a tender doctor who despite their dire circumstances dares to hope and dream of a future for them both. Dunmore’s portrayal of the
Leningrad tragedy alerts senses to all that is basically human and necessary for our survival.

Her debut novel *Zennor in Darkness* focuses on a young girl’s relationship with the writer D H Lawrence and his German wife during the First World War. *House of Orphans* deals with subversion and the reaction of state and society to those it regards as threats to the status quo. In *House of Orphans* the young revolutionaries and the reaction to them has parallels with so-called War on Terror. Russia’s struggle to hold onto its empire, involving questions of how to define “Russianness”, be it nationality, language, geography, ethnicity or culture, are questions taxing the leaders of the US Empire now. “Russian history is a constant story of expansion and contraction. Does it hold onto that with a relaxed grip or does it tighten it really hard?” Dunmore asks almost to herself. The more repressive the grip, the more the revolutionaries react, she adds. “That was true then, and that is true now” (Dunmore 03). She reads her way through the greats of Russian literature – Pushkin, Turgenev, Anna Akhmatove and, of course, Tolstoy. *Zennor in Darkness* sets in an eerie village on the windswept west Cornish coast. *The Siege*, was greeted as a Tolstoyan epic.

*House of Orphans* is set forty years earlier, in Finland, and concerns another time of trial that is tending to slip out of sight: the uprising of the Finns against Russian domination in 1901. Finland had been under the nominal control of Russia for hundred years, but is now in the hands of a Russian-appointed governor-general and the Okhrana, his secret police. In *House of Orphans*, set in early 20th-century Finland, the lonely doctor’s unrequited and inappropriate love for his teenage servant enables him to grow, painfully, to moral maturity. *House of Orphans* moves further back in time than previous works, digging deeper into the history of, which was explored from the Soviet aspect magnificently in her 2001 novel *The Siege*, about the siege of Stalingrad. Though focused on Finland, *House of Orphans* shows how the Romanovs contributed to their own downfall. Czar didn’t realize how close to the edge he was in terms of history and how the
Romanovs were about to fall over the cliff’s edge. Czar Nicholas II failed to realize that his role as “father of the people” was not only anachronistic, but hated. Though in his eyes a Finnish petition demanding autonomy was a minor issue, it contributed to his downfall, reflecting Dunmore’s conviction that the events that shape our destiny are usually those of which we are unaware. In The Siege, the action of which centres on a starving Russian family, there is the same sense being buried by events. Though the family despairs that the Nazi blockade of Stalingrad will end, we readers know that the Germans face defeat.

A dysfunctional family is centre stage with a strange history that runs throughout the Spell Of Winter. The strange brother and sister are with a collection of servants. They are out of the blue - bang - straights into the incestuous relationship. But in reality they are disastrous and destructive. It is very important to boost memory the story. Clearly, smells assist (and can trigger) memory. The novel’s rich imagery moves between the stark, harsh winter worlds that Catherine loves and the warm summers she loathes, when the air is thick with the scent of roses and painful memories. Through decades of changing seasons, the two siblings mature within an enclosed world in which they are virtually imprisoned by servants who guard the mysteries of their heritage. In different ways, first Rob and later Catherine will dare to break through the wall that encircles their perversely stifled lives to move toward heartbreaking but final release. Catherine and her brother, Rob, do not know why they have been abandoned by their parents. In the house of their grandfather, “the man from nowhere,” they forge a passionate refuge for themselves against the terror of family secrets, and while the world outside moves to the brink of war; their sibling love becomes fraught with dangers. But as Catherine fights free of the past, the spell of winter that has held her in its grasp begins to break.

One of the themes in Mourning Ruby is the significance of personal and public history. The charming and elusive Mr Damiano, who becomes Rebecca's employer after her child's death, also bestows his tales upon her.
Rebecca is a woman without a family history: She was put into a shoebox at birth and left in the backyard of an Italian restaurant. His account, like Joe's, acts as a kind of bandage, binding her wounds, repairing her sense of loss. Rebecca has no family, no sense of her own history except the story of the shoebox. Poignantly, when her daughter is born, she feels for the first time this lack of any personal history to hand on to her child. What *Mourning Ruby* does is to give Rebecca stories, a history, even as it takes away the child who made her want them. The real story is that suddenly Adam appeared, and he was a true lover of Rebecca. Out of this union emerged a baby daughter, Ruby. Rebecca puts all her life into Ruby so that she, at least, will have a true history. But for some unexplained reason - perhaps the concentration of all emotions on poor Ruby - Rebecca and Adam have no further children. Then, when Ruby is six years old, she is fatally hit by a car. Joe wrote her letter detailing their sorrow. Adam was thinking of Ruby like that, remembering the Disney plasters and the yellow cardigan. He remembered the way Ruby would balance in his arms, lightly, with a straight back and frowning slightly at first. And breaking into a smile, petal after petal of it, her eyelids, her cheeks, her lips. Since Rebecca's whole life was Ruby, there is nothing left. She retreats to various dream worlds, assisted by Mr. Damiano, whose business it is to create Dreamworlds in various hotels and amusement parks. Interspersed throughout Rebecca's story is the description of Joe's futile attempts to write a biography of Stalin. This exploration of the nature of history and memory provides a subtle metaphor for Rebecca's desire to capture and define her own memories. She says:

“Lucia might simply have handed over the baby, and kept the box. But she gave it to the policeman, while the policeman took charge of my damp, furious self, and so my history was preserved. These days they might be able to take my mother’s DNA off the cardboard, from the marks made by her sweating fingers. Maybe there was saliva on the box from the kiss she gave me as she sat me down. But it's too late for all that. And besides my mother committed no crime” (*Mourning Ruby* 12).
Lucia had done her duty. She had preserved me from a yard full of rats and shadows. She had handed her over to the authority, raw, screeching, but unharmed.

Joe discusses with Rebecca about Stalin. Stalin goes to his dacha and no one knew what to do as the German army is advancing. There he makes the whole crew dance after dinner. They have to keep drinking because he wants them drunk and incapable and thus they would humiliate themselves. It is 1941. Anything could have happened. Stalin would have stayed at the dacha. He would have never come back to Moscow. They would have had to get rid of him eventually. No matter how terrified they are, they would have done it and history would have got going again—but a different history.

*Counting the Stars* is a truly beautiful book, tying a vivid period in history and a doomed love affair into a sinuous stream of words and word-understanding. ‘Being Roman,’ declares Catullus, the poet protagonist of *Counting the Stars*, ‘is a state of mind’. As in earlier novels — *The Siege, House of Orphans* — Helen Dunmore allows the reader to enter the ‘state of mind’ of a specific moment in history. Here, Julius Caesar's Rome, in all its squalor and grandeur, brutality and sophistication, is made available in a way that is almost wholly convincing. Catullus says,

“Becoming Roman isn't just a question of where you live, or whom you know, or what you do. It's a state of mind. I believed that I was Roman now. I'd left the provinces and plunged into a life that kept on seducing me even when it no longer dazzled me. Gossip, poetry, bathhouses, sex with girls, sex with boys, theatre, music, who's in who's out, epigrams, satires, new books, new cloths, old wine, new friends and even newer enemies...I can't get Manlius' villa out of my head. Its clean proportions and sober history, a piece of old, plain, heroic Rome in our modern city of palatial villas and roaring, rickety tenements. It's gone, as it had to go. That hive crammed with dozens of tenants has replaced it” (*Counting the Stars* 09).

Catullus is obsessed with Clodia, the ‘Lesbia’ of his poems. Clodia is ten years older, married and a mother. She is cruel, voracious and spoiled and she has
plenty of lovers besides Catullus, including her own brother, the sadistic and ambitious ‘Pretty Boy Clodius’. None of this deters Catullus, who chooses to believe that a core of innocence and true feeling lies within Clodia to which only he, with his poet’s sensibility, has access. Counting the Stars is a rich experience; Dunmore successfully senses in her recreation of the social and physical fabric of the ancient world. The emotional world of Catullus and Clodia is stunted and static.

Dunmore first came across Catullus’ works at school. “I first read and translated his poetry when I was thirteen, when he appeared immensely adult, sophisticated and often puzzling. Now, as an adult who is much older than Catullus ever was, I see other things; a young man’s vulnerability as well as his brilliance, a love shaded by obsession as well as by passion, and a great poet who has influenced the way succeeding generations read and write about love.” Catullus, she adds, also forms part of a select group of poets and writers who succeed in perfectly conveying the spirit of their age, like Pepys and Donne.

“When I first read Catullus’ poems I knew relatively little about the historical context in which he wrote, or about the other great figures of his time, such as Cicero. One might argue that this led to a very pure, disinterested reading … However, in the novel I wanted to write about the world of Rome in the late years of the Republic, about a young man coming to the city to make his name and create a place for himself in a sophisticated, turbulent, often violent society. I wanted to write about a society where slavery was the normal underpinning of every transaction and relationship; where enormous wealth was expending itself in display; where Julius Caesar was rising to greater and greater power; and where a young man could write devastatingly obscene and abusive poetry about Caesar and yet be invited to dine with him” (Dunmore 32).

Republican Rome emerges vividly from her writing, but as Dunmore reminds, the “art of the novelist is never to instruct or inform. What I try to achieve is to make the reader subtly aware of the society and the facts.” Indeed, she continued, “information has to be pared back to allow the
narrative to be the driving force." Or in this case, the twin narratives, because in *Counting the Stars*, there are two stories, a love story and a murder, that are closely entwined.

All of Dunmore's writing highlights political issues of the time, whether slavery or the tragedy of the war brides (when Clare Coyne sleeps with John William, she doesn't know that women up and down the country are breaking all the taboos of their upbringing and having sexual relationships with 'best boys' or fiancés home on leave). Again, the story of *Zennor in Darkness* focuses on how the First World War redefined the relationship of the State to the individual, and permanently altered the social fabric: for example the impacts of the Defence of the Realm Act of 1914 and of the Military Service Act of 1916 cannot be overestimated. She uses this political focus to examine the nature of history and to explore the ways in which individuals as well as nations deal with their past. For example, the tensions between different versions of Finland's history are central to *House of Orphans*, and are expressed through characters that cling passionately to their opposing beliefs. *Your Blue Eyed Boy* centres on a middle aged English woman, called Simone. She is a district judge. Simone is well educated and married to a failed architect, Donald, who himself is on the edge of reality following his firm's dramatic collapse and Donald's close brush with bankruptcy, in fact it seems he could be having a breakdown. The pair has two young boys. But both have large debts and no friends in the area. Simone had given up her legal aid practice to take the district judge's job in order to guarantee her family's financial survival. Simone finds her relationship with Donald is strained by his refusal to reconnect with normal society. The blue-eyed boy of the title is Michael, a boyfriend from years ago who has suddenly re-appeared in her life. Simone did some things in her youth that she would rather forget, that do not fit in with her modern image as a judge and things that she would rather her family did not know about. This is a really dark but engrossing story. Michael wants Simone to return to their past life - he is obviously mentally disturbed and she is obviously quite scared.
Simone worked in the United States. Her boyfriend, Michael, damaged mentally for life by the Vietnam War. Dunmore uses flashbacks to paint the picture of Simone's two lives, her American past and her English present. Is Michael correct in saying, "You can't pretend the past didn't happen?" (145). The past is always there. One can never truly escape its influence. Simone remembers particularly her student days and her trip to the USA in the era of hippies, dope and cheesecloth dresses. She recalls, and sometimes with a certain thrill, the way-out things she did with Michael and Calvin, the pair of post-Vietnam drop-outs she lived with. Michael was her lover. Calvin had a penchant for photography. And thus, after twenty years, Michael reappears in Simone's life. Calvin has died. But the photos of Simone's youthful sexual experimentation live on. Michael has fallen on hard times. Perhaps Simone can help out. Helen Dunmore's *With Your Crooked Heart* explores the roots that the past puts down in the present, and finds that it is impossible to escape the consequences of reckless actions. Real estate mogul Paul turns dilapidated buildings into luxury apartments, shedding the squalor of his childhood for the trappings of privileged London life, but he cannot save his brother, never-do-well Johnnie, from the younger man's self-destructive tendencies. Dunmore plumbs familiar depths, exploring the anxieties of threatened children, the twisted family ties and the adulterous secrets that give her plots an almost gothic richness. Paul's wife, Louise, conceives Anna after a fleeting encounter with Johnnie. Ten years later, the secret infidelity continues to weigh on her; she grows fat and alcoholic, and Paul abandons her for icy Sonia. When he marries Sonia and moves with Anna to their new house in Yorkshire, Louise slips more deeply into drink and confides in Johnnie, himself mixed up in drugs and crime. Johnnie goes on the lam to flee vicious creditors, and Louise follows him.

5.3 SLIPPED FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS:

The theme of children losing parents, or vice versa, often seems to recur. Dunmore's *Burning Bright* was about a sixteen-year-old prostitute caught in a triangle between her pimp and bondage-loving lover. *A Spell of*
Winter was a Gothic novel about two incestuous children who try to parent themselves after their mother has left. Talking to the Dead was about a child smothered by his sisters. Your Blue-Eyed Boy is a thriller about a woman haunted by her ex-lover, and With Your Crooked Heart is about how an alcoholic mother allows her child to be taken from her. Dunmore’s The Siege is a bleak account of the siege of Leningrad told through the eyes of a group of inmates forced to eat boiled leather to survive.

A theme runs through Helen Dunmore’s work of families in which the relationships have somehow slipped. Everywhere there are sibling relationships (such as the incestuous one between Catherine and Rob in A Spell of Winter), strange half-siblings (like Sapphire meeting her mer-half-brother in the Ingo tetralogy for children) and adults parenting children not really theirs. Anna does it for her little brother, Kolya, in The Siege, the story of a family’s struggles during the siege of Leningrad. In Counting the Stars, she realizes, the hero is fathered and mothered by a freed slave. He writes about his beloved that he loves her almost as a father does a child. There is a long tradition for the heroes of children’s books to be orphans, of course. But the modern step-family opens up new relationships for writers to explore. “Not necessarily,” says Dunmore. “I think cases such as Anna’s, in which she accidentally becomes a parent (when her mother dies in childbirth), are historically quite accurate. There were lots of occasions when people were not brought up by their two biological parents. Maybe the family has no money, so the child is brought up elsewhere. Even in Jane Austen’s family the children were essentially given away (in Jane’s case to a wet nurse). Charlotte Bronte’s mother died and the aunt moved in to look after them... I think my stories are reflecting a historical reality” (Dunmore 32).

In Mourning Ruby, Helen Dunmore depicts a story of motherless child and childless mother. Soon after birth, Rebecca, the narrator, was put into a shoe box by her mother and dumped in the alleyway behind an Italian restaurant. Luckily the Italians found her before some stray dog, or cat, or rat. She was passed on to rather unsatisfactory foster parents with whom she
grew up. Thus she is a woman cut off from her biological past. Drifting, without known relatives in the world, she is living with Joe. These meagre beginnings flourish into the richness of an ordinary life. Cocooned with friendship and love and the arrival of a daughter, Ruby, “I’d become the woman I’d once... envied.” The tragedy strikes when Ruby is run down by a motorist. Rebecca cannot reconcile herself to her daughter’s loss. The intensity of her grief leads to their eventual separation. It is at this time that Rebecca’s shattered life is restored through her work for Mr Damiano, who tells her his life story as the son of poor trapeze artists. Joe, meanwhile, is working on his second novel – about the time of Stalin’s retreat to his dacha when Hitler invaded Russia. After talking to an Afghan war veteran, he decides to abandon the task and goes to Vancouver Island to write a novel. Rebecca leaves London and, on a visit to St Ives, starts working as a waitress in a local cafe. Here, she is visited by Joe who gives her a copy of his story. As a translator of Mandelstam, Dunmore evokes his image of poetry as an aeroplane flying, giving birth to a baby aeroplane that flies on its own. This literary symbolism moves the story of adopted Rebecca, and her dear friend Joe, who ultimately pens the story within the story that helps Rebecca find her own peace and family history. Rebecca thinks of what Ruby lost. The life Ruby didn’t have- her life that didn’t spread out and grow. She thinks less of her grief, her longing for the feel of Ruby and the smell and touch of her. She thinks of the space of years Ruby missed. The houses she would have inhabited, away from them.

All the main characters in *With Your Crooked Heart* are trying to escape family relationships. As they have grown up in families that are full of pain. The novel is about the pain of families that are injuring rather than nurturing their members. Dunmore has created the contrast between the pain and the sensuous joy that can both be found in family situations. There are moments of intense delight but it is a story of crime with a tragic trajectory which is pushing them all on to their destiny. The only positive relationship is in between the two children, Anna and her friend David, and a
kitten. Anna is a realist. She acts and looks for ways to act. The fact that Anna and David up sticks and go on their journey to London together shows them as resourceful, bold and determined, no longer relying on adults. They have recognized that the adults don't care for them properly, so they are going to have to rely on themselves.

*With Your Crooked Heart* introduces Louise, a tough and introspective Londoner trapped in a subtle battle between two brothers. Paul and Johnnie were born twelve years apart, in a one-bedroom flat in a dingy London suburb. Their ascent to money and power looks easy from a distance, but the seductive brothers burn those who get too close. When Paul marries Louise, Johnnie is part of the contract, and their daughter, Anna, is tangled in it from birth. Paul deals in the development of contaminated land; self-destructive Johnnie deals in crime. When Johnnie has to flee the country, Louise goes with him. Their trip sets in motion inevitabilities that have smouldered beneath the surface from the beginning, a dire and redemptive chain of events that devastates every branch of this crooked family tree. Louise is an alcoholic, to such an extent that she is often unable to make it to the toilet in time. And so the house smells of urine. It is a mess. She is a mess. Paul leaves, taking Anna with him, and Louise is allowed two hours of visiting rights per week. She descends into alcoholism, loses custody of her daughter. And thus, their family relationship proved slipped. A driver brings her, and picks her up at the precise time. But even this is too much for Paul. He buys a house up in Yorkshire, taking Sonia and Anna away from London and telling Louise that he will no longer tolerate her influence upon Anna. Louise finds only the saddest of redemptions when she flees the country with Johnnie. “There's no real dark in cities,” Louise thinks to herself at one point.

### 5.4 SECRETS:

Secrets, whether about addiction as in *With Your Crooked Heart*, incest in *A Spell in Winter* or the plotting of revolutionary cells in *House of Orphans*, are another key theme in Dunmore’s work. She is interested in the power the
secret has, a power that is diminished or destroyed by revelation. “It is very interesting to write about secrets because you have a character all of whose behaviour is governed by something that is only partially revealed. There is a huge amount of that in life, a huge amount of people being propelled along by things that are not in their control” (Dunmore 32).

Secrets and lies are not confined to the activities of individuals, and Dunmore believes that the secret schemes of the state represent a far greater betrayal. “To deceive somebody is a very aggressive act,” she says concisely. “That is true of organisations as well as individuals. Governments which lie to their citizens are guilty of a hostile act” (Dunmore 32). Though she does not say it, it is clear she is referring to our own government’s behaviour in Iraq. Dunmore concedes that uncovering those secrets and revealing the impact they have on individuals as well as nations is part of the novelist’s job. But that does not mean a novelist’s role is that of historian or, in contemporary novels, social commentator, she claims: “That could become what fiction should not be, which a morale crusade is in an overt way” (Dunmore 32).

_A Spell of Winter_ is a compelling turn-of-the-century tale of innocence corrupted by secrecy, and the grace of second chances. As Catherine fights free of her dark present and haunting past, the spell of winter that has held her in its grasp begins to break. Catherine and her brother, Rob, do not know why they have been abandoned by their parents. Incarcerated in the enormous country house of their grandfather - 'the man from nowhere' - they create a refuge against their family's dark secrets. There they forge a passionate refuge for themselves against the terror of family secrets. And while the world outside moves to the brink of First World War; their sibling love becomes fraught with dangers.

_Counting the Stars_ marks a complete contrast by jumping back to the late Roman Republic. Dunmore added that “in this case, it was when I realized that there might be a story behind the death of the pet sparrow that Clodia/Lesbia loved so much … and another story behind that, of another death. There were secrets there, and the beginnings of a plot” (Dunmore 32).
In the heat of Rome’s long summer, the poet Catullus and his older married lover, Clodia Metelli, meet in secret. Living at the heart of sophisticated, brittle and brutal Roman society at the time of Pompey, Crassus and Julius Caesar, Catullus is obsessed with Clodia, the Lesbia of his most passionate poems. He is jealous of her husband, of her maid, even of her pet sparrow. Catullus is ‘her dear poet’, but possibly not her only interest . . . Catullus’ relationship with Clodia is one of the most intense, passionate, tormented and candid in history. In love and in hate, their story exposes the beauty and terrors of Roman life in the late Republic. Catullus’ true friends- Calvus, Fabullus, Veranius- are flush of affection for him. They are his people. Fabullus says himself, “I’m the grave of every secret”. They know where poems come from, how they work, and where they fail. They know the mystery well enough to see the wheels turn in its heart. Clodia is a widow now. It is all over, that part of the play where Clodia was a wife, Catullus her secret, desperate lover, and Metellus Celer either knew or didn’t suspect, either cared or was indifferent. Catullus always wanted her husband out of the way. People are calling her a murderer.

In *Your Blue-Eyed Boy*, when a letter arrives from the other side of the ocean, Simone, a thirty-eight-year-old judge, suspects that a long-ago lover has targeted her for "the most intimate of crimes," blackmail. The prospect shatters an already tenuous peace: Simone is shouldering the burden of her husband’s breakdown, her family’s mounting debts, and the unexpected demands of a new job. Soon the ripple of terror that flows through Simone’s world like the ghost of a former self threatens to propel her public and private lives onto a harrowing collision course.

5.5 BLOOD:

The bloodshed and destruction of World War I and II are depicted in Helen Dunmore’s war and historical novels. *The Siege* is set during the blockade of Leningrad by German troops, focusing on a small group of civilians trying to adapt to starvation, piercing cold and enemy bombardment. Dunmore set out a world of shrinking horizons. The frontiers of the
characters' lives are pulled back and back: to the city's limits, the walls of an apartment, a single, icy room, a spoonful of honey. Fear pulses from the pages, but while cold and hunger slaughtered Leningraders in their thousands. These adversaries are just as terrifying. In *The Betrayal*, Andrei, and Anna and her younger brother, Kolya have constructed a life of more-or-less blameless obscurity. But their peace is shattered when Andrei is called on to treat the son of Volkov, a senior secret police operative. Andrei and Anna find themselves plunged into a tenebrous zone in which logic and truth have no currency. Death and blood recurs many times in Dunmore's novels.

In *Spell Of Winter*, Dunmore chooses blood as a definitive symbol. "Blood seeped rustily out of me.... I thought I would never stop bleeding" (189). These are the words of Cathy after her abortion. Blood is mentioned numerous times in *Spell Of Winter*. The novel begins with a corpse's rotten arm falling off. Up. Little Cathy and her brother, Rob, are shooting a hare ("blood dripped steadily out from the hole in her thigh") and going off with their hideous/pathetic governess, Miss Gallagher (characterized with all the subtlety of the Wicked Witch of the West), to visit their father in the nuthouse. They are accompanied by descriptions of stone lions with teeth "ready to bite" and a carpet covered with roses the color of "the blood that oozed from the butcher's parcels. . .". Given this dire setup, Cathy's father attacks her during the visit. The sister and brother later embark on an incestuous relationship that is very shocking.

In *Mourning Ruby*, Helen Dunmore depicts with aching sensitivity this mother who loses not only a beloved child but the only blood relative she knows, and eventually manages to go on. Rebecca's mother left her in a shoebox outside an Italian restaurant in 1965. Miraculously, someone found the infant before the rats did. She has an unhappy childhood with adoptive parents. More than thirty years later she has built a life for herself – married Adam and had her own, wonderful daughter, Ruby. But when Ruby is involved in an accident, Rebecca's life tumbles down and she is forced to face her loss – both as a mother and as a daughter. Rebecca, the mother who loses
not only a beloved child but the only blood relative she knows. There was, however, no miracle to save the grown-up Rebecca's child Ruby from a tragic death. The narrative goes back and forth in time with Rebecca and the men in her life. First is Joe, the historian Rebecca loves platonically. He is her roommate and soul mate. He introduces her to Adam, the dedicated neonatal doctor who becomes her husband and Ruby's father. Soon afterwards, Joe leaves Rebecca, realizing that they will never have a romantic connection.

The references of blood are also seen in *Counting the Stars*. Clodia's name will follow Catullus everywhere. He won't be able to escape her. Even if he can stop meeting her he will never be able to avoid hearing about her. Their circle is too small an island in the sea of Rome. She is in his blood. He is not even sure if this is still love. Love and hate are so fused together that he can't drag one from the arms of the other. There is no sense left in him: only sensation. Feeling tears him apart. Catullus reminds Crassus' crucifixions after the Spartacan revolt. It made him shiver although he knew it is not going to happen to him as he isn't a slave:

“A man crucified every fifty paces, the length of the Appian Way. Six thousand slaves hanging there, stinking and rotting in the midway sun. Blood and crap and piss and sweat and screams until at last, one by one, they had the luck to die. Crassus left them up on those crosses until the worms and vultures had seen to every last ribbon of flesh. A stew of flies and maggots simmered for miles. That’s what I’m like. Pissing and bleeding and sweating and screaming because I’m being torn apart... and I’m hanging here in rags. Love is one arm of the cross, Clodia, and hate is the other” (*Counting the Stars* 73).

5.6 MADNESS:

The idea of madness is central to Helen Dunmore's war and historical novels. Madness is the problem that plagues the soldiers. The symptoms of madness range from an irrational fear of blood to mutism, from an inability to eat to a vocal protest of the war. In short, madness translates into an inability
to act in a manner that normal society considers rational. These “mad” men live outside the bounds of what is socially acceptable, and are therefore removed from their duty, labeled as “shell-shocked.” “Shell shock” -- an illness originally indistinguishable from cowardice and malingering -- is a new name for the symptoms known as hysteria. The causes are eventually of the particular psychology of Great War combat. No wonder they broke down. It is the doctor’s burden to cure these soldiers of their private ruptures of sanity so they may be sent back to serve the greater public one.

Scenes of madness are prominent plot devices in *Spell Of Winter*. Madness occurs from the helpless father to the domineering governess, or even the exuberant Mr. Bullivant. The governess is accused of madness.

In *Counting the Stars*, Catullus found mad after the love of Clodia. Clodia is ten years older, married and a mother. She is cruel, voracious and spoiled. She has plenty of lovers besides Catullus, including her own brother, the sadistic and ambitious ‘Pretty Boy Clodius’. None of this deters Catullus, who chooses to believe that a core of innocence and true feeling lies within Clodia to which only he, with his poet's sensibility, has access. But she has possibly unnatural relationship even with her pet sparrow. She mourns deeply over its death.

5.7 SWEETNESS OF LIFE:

“What I do is play,” (Dunmore 02) Dunmore says seriously. She means playing in the sense of a child joyously absorbed by creative industry. “In that way art, music and writing are all forms of play” (02) she explains. “They bring out something extra that isn’t to do with survival, making money or ensuring your own genetic survival” (02). Her belief in the importance of play echoes that of Mr Damiano, a showman who employs Rebecca, the central character in *Mourning Ruby*. Dunmore recalls:

“I often see that with older people, just the way they can sit there on a bench and bathe in the spring sunshine or have a cup of teas and it is pure enjoyment of the state of being alive. It is a
welcome image that catches me unaware on a bleak midwinter day. “Often that pure enjoyment gets covered up in all this”, “we should be doing this or we should be doing that or we are not allowed to do this and blah, blah, blah. In our fruitless attempts to get the feeling back we throw loads of drink down our throats, take lots of drugs or eat everything we can find, but the sweetness of life is not that. Life is very beautiful” (Dunmore32).

Despite the often grim settings of Dunmore’s adult novels, the sense that life is sweet is at their core. Even in With Your Crooked Heart, there is sensuousness to the descriptions of Louise’s descent into alcoholism. The description of an oily Martini trickling across her tongue and down her throat make a powerful statement about the guilty addictive pleasure she get from drinking.

Mr Damiano, a showman believes in pleasure, and says that play is the best thing that human beings do. No doubt, Sex is play, food is play, and love is play: playing with our children is one of the most profound experiences many of us ever have. And writing fiction is also a form of play. Dunmore would like people to come into her Dreamworld and then choose to stay. Mourning Ruby is hugely moving, strongly plotted novel, full of vitality and a brilliant wealth of story. It’s about memory and history, loss and mourning. More than thirty years ago, a mother laid her newborn baby daughter in a shoebox and left it by the bins in the back yard of an Italian restaurant. Now that baby, Rebecca, is a mother herself, searching for her origins and a story that will make sense of her life. Mr Damiano, a showman employs Rebecca for much of the novel. He wants to create Dreamworlds. Dunmore writes:

“We wove a web in childhood,
   A web of sunny air,
We dug a spring in infancy,
   Of water pure and fair;
We sowed in youth a mustard seed,
   We cut an almond rod…” (Mourning Ruby 114).
Anna, the protagonist who tries to save her father's life in the siege of Leningrad, is often referred to as “my soul” (113, 158): her father rarely calls his daughter by her name. The words of Anna’s father the unprecedented tenderness have sombre spiritual sweetness. “My soul, he calls Anna, my bird. His eyes follow her, and they glow with a life she’d never seen in them before.” A Russian woman, long-suffering and succouring, does not necessarily need a name. Her identity is associated with her soul, which is supposed, only a Russian might possess. The emotional, the impractical and the spiritual are associated in western patriarchal narrative with feminine identity. In Russian, the words “soul” (dusha), “motherland” (rodina), and “Russia” (Rossiya) are all feminine, and can be linked to a conventional view of the East and Russia as being in the image of women.

Anna got to get back to Leningrad as fast as she can. “Dear Leningrad, a hundred times dearer at this moment than it’s ever been, like the mother hive to a bee that’s out too late in the year. She has been those bees fly low, struggling, limping home through thick, cold air” (115).

5.8 CHANGE:

The idea of change functions in Dunmore’s novels to inform and develop the concepts of healing, regenerating, and regrowth. A key theme of The Siege is the way in which people adapt to change. When Anna joins with the other women building the city defences, she becomes aware that there are now two realities:

“There are summer trees, flights of startled birds, and the smell of honeysuckle in the depth of the night. This is the old reality, as smooth as the handle of a favourite cup in your hand. And then there’s the new reality which consists of hour after hour of digging, and seconds of terror as sharp as the zigzag of lightning. Lightning that’s looking for you, seeking out warm flesh on the bare summer fields” (The Siege 53).

As the siege intensifies, the old reality fades. Priorities and perceptions have shifted. The harvest moon becomes the bomber’s moon. When the food warehouses are bombed, the first instinct is not to think of those who have
died in the raid but about all the butter and flour that has been lost. The little things like whether to keep an onion back for sprouting become crucial subjects for discussion. The trees in the park where lovers once carved their initials have become ‘defensive positions, behind which a man can crouch, watching, alert’. The year is 1941 and the Germans have laid siege to Leningrad, burning the city’s only food reserves, and their steely blockade has the people living on rations of two slices of bread a day. Death has reared its ugly head everywhere, and starvation has made people ruthless toward one another in their desperate battle for survival. Dunmore consistently pushes herself to new challenges - most impressively in her novel, *The Siege*, which fused the personal and the political in its account of the siege of Leningrad.

In *Mourning Ruby*, the historical dimension feels extraneous to the intimacy and horror of its central theme, which is the passion and fragility of the bond between mother and child. Everything centres on this, from Adam’s job as a paediatrician to the novel that Joe writes. Florence, the young unmarried mother in Joe’s novel, becomes a prostitute in order to survive with her daughter. When Rebecca, shares a flat with Joe in London, she begins to enjoy the pleasures of friendship and family for the first time in her life: she was abandoned as a baby and adopted by a couple remarkably unsuitable for parenting. Joe, a historian interested in Stalin, introduces her to simple pleasures and shows her that loneliness need not be permanent. And it’s through Joe that she meets Adam, a neonatologist who becomes her husband and the father of their daughter, Ruby (*For the first time, I was tied to someone by blood*). In neonatology, clinical practice changes week by week. Ten years ago was another world. Different technology, different drug protocols: a whole different world. Adam lived all those changes minute by minute. Ruby’s death reveals the consequences of loss. Numb by Ruby’s death, Rebecca drifts away from Adam, finding diversion in a job as an assistant to a hotelier, Mr. Damiano. Adam buries himself in his work with premature babies.
"Mourning Ruby" is not about Ruby, and not really about Rebecca, the woman who is mourning her. Firstly it is about Joe, with whom she shares a flat and has an intense friendship. Then it is about Adam, his friend, with whom she falls in love and marries, and has Ruby. And then it is about Mr Damiano, who offers her a job that is really a place to hide. Rebecca expresses, "Mr Domiano has educated me, as Joe did. Adam, no. Adam changed me. We changed each other. That's something different." (P.24) After Ruby dies and she does not know what else to do, this is the whole 'loss' and change of their lives. It was an accident. Rebecca shattered:

"But if it was an accident then everything is an accident, Ruby was born to us by accident. The joy of her was an accident. No matter how solid and safe it looked, all the time our household had been an accident, a frenzy of atoms butting against each other. And now it had all flown apart" (Mourning Ruby 148).

Adam had split his life in two. In the compartment of work, the lights were still on. Minute by minute Adam was there, concentrating, frowning, smiling, changing with every change in the babies, nothing every detail of a drug protocol. More and more work was drawing him in. Adam was involved in an international project on HIV and prematurity. Adam had to stay at the hospital, because he couldn’t concentrate at home:

"Our house was full of grief, packed solid with this thing that kept changing shape and seizing us in new ways. It had moved in like a crowed of strangers: animal, vegetable, and mineral" (104).

In Zennor In Darkness the theme of change is reflected in the form of courage. Courage is explored in its many manifestations -the ways in which people adapt to change: the courage of a community facing down the realities of the war being fought across the sea in France, which they experience through the sounds of the guns travelling across the Channel and its insatiable appetite for their young men. The courage also of the author D H Lawrence, not fit for military duty but also outspokenly opposed to this war.
In a precarious position, Lawrence married to a German woman and seeks refuge in an isolated cottage in Zennor.

Dunmore’s characters are fascinating. It is reassuring to know that Dunmore too finds it tough to leave them and move on. She recalls hearing a recent interview with JK Rowling, who confessed that Harry Potter et al live on in her own imagination. “I think that’s a very writerly thing to do,” (Dunmore01). “Sometimes when I go past the house where I set Zennor in Darkness, where Clare and her father lived, I still almost expect to see them there. Even though their garden has been made into a parking space and there’s a garage where she grew the vegetables. I think that’s just the way it is: once they are created they never quite die away” (Dunmore01). In her fiction, particularly The Siege, Dunmore has been celebrated for chronicling “women’s lives”. But the writers who inspired her, Pushkins, Tolstoys and Lawrences, are more overtly political. “I think I have written quite a lot about the way people try to struggle to carve out some kind of life, some kind of space where they can live their lives without interference and derision and the fear of the higher-ups,” (Dunmore02) Dunmore says thoughtfully.

The idea of Change is also reflected in Counting the Stars. Clodia is seen in everyone’s mouth and everyone’s eyes. People whom she wouldn’t let into her house tell stories about ‘what Clodia really like’. Dunmore writes:

“She has the power of changing to suit anyone’s eyes. If they want to see a great lady, she’ll be blue-blooded and arrogant. If they want a whore she’ll rustle, giggle and snatch at purses. She’ll play in the gutter better than anyone” (Counting the Stars 29).

Mourning Ruby is a literary novel about loss and recovery. Rebecca was abandoned by her mother in a shoebox in the backyard of an Italian restaurant when she was two years old. She is adopted by foster parents and thirty years later gets married to Adam, a consultant neonatologist dealing with premature babies. She gives birth to Ruby and starts a new life for herself and her small family. But a tragedy suddenly upsets the calm order of
her life and changes its course forever. The novel traces the harrowing life of Rebecca with several interesting temporal juxtapositions and flashbacks that add to its complexity. Rebecca is adopted by a couple so featureless that they leave no mark on her. The formative character for Rebecca is her flat-mate Joe, whose father and grandfather were pilots, or "flyers," in two world wars. When we meet him he is writing a biography of Stalin’s second wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva. When Ruby is involved in an accident, Rebecca’s life tumbles down and she has forced to face her loss – both as a mother and as a daughter. She reaches out to those around her, listening to the stories of their lives, in an attempt to understand her own.

Thus, Helen Dunmore’s work deserves attention for its subject matter. Her novels do not deal with grand themes and great public events. Rather they tend to be quite personal and limited in scope. This chapter analyzes Dunmore’s novels sequentially and determines the various features of her fictional craft. She has chosen subjects including starvation and family collapse. Her novels deal with themes of memory, trauma, survival and recovery along with violence, alcoholism, domestic abuse and the development of the depiction of sexual matters. Dunmore tackles with the themes of money, problems of women, alcoholism and violence which are central to her novels. Her treatment to the minor themes exposes inequality of gender, class and place. The themes like history and memory, secrets, blood, change, sweetness of life, parenthood, slipped family relations and loss are some of the minor themes are focused in this study.