**INTRODUCTION**

“The orchestra of someone’s life is made up of so much different instrumentation isn’t it?” says Helen Dunmore, one of the most prolific writers of later 20th century. “My own view is that life is quite testing. When I talk to people, I always uncover the most extraordinary depths of experience. I suppose that’s what fiction does. It reflects the extraordinariness of that experience. And I think so much of fiction takes place before interaction becomes explicit, before people begin to talk or touch. That interests me greatly” (Dunmore 103).

The multi-faceted Helen Dunmore touches every aspect of human life and explores its several dimensions with great skills. She is specially known as the creator of dream world who dreams herself and makes others dream about their lives. Her novels are the record of various aspects of life such as pleasure and pain, victory and defeat, triumph and tragedy etc. The Washington Post Book World observes that “Helen Dunmore takes a tale that could drive a thriller and weaves her linguistic spell around it. The result is brilliant and terrifying, an unbeatable combination” (Lesher 268).

1. **LIFE SKETCH OF HELEN DUNMORE**

Helen Dunmore was born on 12th December, 1952 in Beverley, East Yorkshire. She is a British poet, novelist and children's writer. She studied English at the University of York. After graduation, she taught English as a foreign language in Finland for two years before publishing her first novel. She worked as a writer, reader, performer and teacher of Poetry and Creative Writing. During the 1980s and early 1990s, she tutored residential writing courses for the “Arvon Foundation” and took part in the “Poetry Society’s Writer in Schools Scheme”, as well as she gave readings and workshops in schools, hospitals, and prisons. She has also taught at the University of Glamorgan, the University of Bristol's Continuing Education Department and at the Open College of the Arts.
Helen Dunmore is the second of four children to her parents. Her father was the eldest of twelve and as she admits her large extended family had a big influence on her life. “In a large family you hear a great many stories. You also come to understand very early that stories hold quite different meanings for different listeners, and can be recast from many viewpoints” (Dunmore 01). Her father, a manager for an industrial firm, was frequently transferred, and the family often, relocated. She has a peripatetic childhood. She doesn’t have a settled sense that there is a plot of land she comes from. By this time, she read haphazardly, with great joy - ballet stories, comics, rhymes. As a child, Dunmore was fascinated by poetry, and by the time she was seven or eight years old, she was already on her way to becoming a poet, learning poems by heart at school and writing sonnets at home on scraps of cards. From an early age, she aspired to be a writer, at no time considering another career, and was experimenting with poetic form before the age of ten when her first published poem appeared in a local newspaper. Moreover, her family background may have stimulated her interest in literature. Her father wrote poems in his youth, and both her parents loved poetry, which gave her confidence in her own writing. Her mother took degrees at the universities of Manchester and Oxford. Both parents fostered intellectual values at home. While Dunmore was the first member of her family to become a professional writer, others were interested in the arts and her sister became a painter.

War and migration cast shadows in her childhood. Her mother lost two brothers in the Second World War, one in a Japanese prison of war camp. When Helen Dunmore was 18, her parents immigrated to the US, taking only their two younger children though they returned after two years. She stayed to study English at York, and then moved, by pure chance, to Bristol, where she met her husband Frank (Francis), a lawyer, in 1997. She has a step-son, Oliver, and the couple has a son Patrick and a daughter Tess.

After returning from teaching English as a Foreign Language in Finland, she began to travel around the country and the world for poetry
tours and writing residences. She also reviewed poetry for *Strand* and *Poetry Review* and later for *The Observer, The Times* and *The Guardian*. Her critical work includes Introductions to the poems of Emily Bronte, The Short Stories of D. H. Lawrence and F. Scott Fitzgerald, A study of Virginia Woolf’s relationships with women and Introductions to the Folio Society’s edition of Anna Karenina and to the new Penguin Classics edition of Tolstoy’s *My Confession*.

Dunmore contributes to arts programmes on BBC Radio. Her first play for radio, *The Mironov Legacy* was broadcast on Radio 4 in the Afternoon Play slot on Tuesday 5th September 2006 at 2.15 pm. The play received excellent reviews. Helen Dunmore took recently translated letters from Pyotr Mirnov to his sister Lena and transformed them into a sensitive and thought-provoking examination of memory and change. “Taken in Shaddower”, a short story written by Dunmore for a BBC Radio 4 short story series, “What I learned from the Metaphysical Poets,” was broadcast in April 2008. She also wrote an article, “Walking into the Story”. She has been a judge for the T S Eliot Prize and the Whitbread Book of the Year award. She now lives in Bristol.

2. **LITERARY CAREER OF HELEN DUNMORE:**

Dunmore wrote some of the short stories which were later collected in *Love of Fat Men*. In the late 1980s she began to publish short stories. She has three collections of short stories, *Love of Fat Men* (1997) and *Ice Cream* (2000), *Rose, 1944* (2005).


Her Books for Teens include *Zillah And Me!* (The Lilac Tree (2004), The Seal Cove (2004), The Silver Bead (2004); The Ingo Tetralogy (Ingo (2005), The Tide Knot (2006), The Deep (2007), The Crossing Of Ingo (2008)).

obsessive love for an older woman by the Roman poet, Catullus. Catullus, the younger son of a noble family, comes to live in Rome to develop his poetic ability and to make a name for himself as a premier poet. He meets and falls instantly in love with the notorious Clodia Metelli, wife of a prominent Roman Senator. *The Betrayal*, (2010) is a worthy sequel to Dunmore’s remarkable novel of ten years ago, *The Siege*. It is a moving story about fear, loss, love and honesty among the demented lies of Stalin’s last days. It dramatizes an almost intolerable tension between private life and the demands of a totalitarian state. Helen Dunmore’s new novel *The Greatcoat* (2012) is an atmospheric ghost story. Set in Yorkshire in 1952, it is the story of Isabel Carey & her growing obsession with the ghost of a young airman killed during the World War II.

Being a children’s author and poet has influenced the way in which she approaches her adult fiction. “Writing children’s books give a writer a very strong sense of narrative drive... Writing poetry makes you intensely conscious of how words sound, both aloud and inside the head of the reader” (Dunmore 01). Dunmore likes to think from the point of view of children and focus on things that they will find interesting. In her books for children she hopes to recapture the pleasure she derived from reading as a child when she would be completely absorbed into a vividly imagined world full of colour and life. Among the many books and authors she would recommend children to try are Michael Morpurgo for his sense of place and strong emotional themes, Dick King Smith for his ability to write with a child’s eye view, Philippa Pearce’s magical *Tom’s Midnight Garden*, Diana Wynne Jones, and Tove Jansson’s complex and moving Moomin books. She is also very fond of Nina Bawden’s *Carrie’s War*. She is aware of the need to write pure and clear sentences. As children do not want to be baffled by the way the language has been constructed, although they enjoy rich, complicated words. She is grateful that she was encouraged to learn the structure of English at school and to become confident in using it. She feels that ‘knowing the rules’ has given her power as a writer. Citing Dickens, Charlotte Bronte and D. H. Lawrence as her
original inspirations, as a novelist, Dunmore layers the revelation of her character and she feels her way into their lives. These characters are typically mothers, lovers and children, and haunting hidden family secrets are a persistent theme. Dunmore finds poetry a “very powerful form and very exhilarating to write”, while “fictions can momentum and exhilaration, but there is a lot of slog.” (Dunmore 02). The poet, Carol Rumens says that she “combines intelligence with sensuousness and musicality; she has a poet’s sensibility, and an almost synaesthetic attitude that one sense can be expressed in terms of another. Her writing is sumptuous and extremely pleasurable” (Dunmore 02).

Helen Dunmore’s distinctive style and thrilling narratives have placed her as one of the most accomplished contemporary British writers. Andrea Adolph examines female characters in novels of Helen Dunmore. He focuses on how women’s relationships to food (cooking, eating, and serving) are used to locate women’s embodiment within the everyday. Dunmore has commitment in portraying a unified female subject. Lesher, Linda writes on Dunmore as “Dunmore is a deeply sensual writer: heat and simmer, food and water, texture and scent are beautifully realized.” (Lesher 268). According to Dunmore, the art of the novelist is never to instruct or inform. What she tries to achieve is to make the reader subtly aware of the society and the facts. Her books are often described as sensuous, filled with exquisite descriptions of food, plants and gardens, clothing, furnishings, and buildings. These carefully selected details recreate the worlds her characters inhabit, and also help to form their personalities. Milada Frankova (2005) analyses Dunmore’s novels in the context of postmodern returns to historical experiences. In Re-experiencing East European History: Helen Dunmore’s The Siege and Louise Doughty’s Fires in the Dark she examines how two Contemporary British novelists recreate the painful experience of a Russian family during the siege of Leningrad during World War II and of a Romany family in pre-war Czechoslovakia and during the Protectorate.
The use of imagery depicting the natural world, food and bodily pleasures and a combination of poetic intensity with compelling storytelling distinguish her writing and she also demonstrates a strong historical imagination in some of her works. The Independent praises her as “…it takes the skill of a very superior novelist to make the unimaginable real. Dunmore is just such a novelist: brave, tender and with a unique gift for immersing the reader in the taste, smell and fear of a story. Writing like hers reminds us that human life is always more than just a statistic” (Guest 01).

3. INFLUENCES ON THE LITERARY CAREER OF HELEN DUNMORE:

The 20th century British literature was influenced by the writings of many authors. Among them are James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. James Joyce an Irish writer stands out among Modernist prose writers and might be considered the most innovative writer of the 20th century. He exemplified a lot of the Modernist tendencies including intersexuality, free verse, stream of consciousness and played with language to such an extent that his work characterized ambiguity in form and content. This would influence subsequent Modernist and Postmodernist writers because of the boundaries he broke with form and also by the play of language which would influence the ambiguity of authors known for Existential, Absurdist or even Poststructural themes. Other authors and artists of this school are T.S. Elliot, Pablo Picasso, Bertolt Brecht, Ezra Pound, George Orwell, Salvador Dali and Aldous Huxley. Some of these artists and authors are not British but their influence certainly reached Britain.

Virginia Woolf’s work, in style and content, had a large influence on British literature of the 20th century and feminism in general. For example, her novel Orlando explored gender roles, the concept of time and how history constitutes individuals. It was a transgender novel and thus broke boundaries in cultural roles and boundaries of genre, mixing non-fiction with fiction.

Dunmore’s early love of reading was undoubtedly encouraged by her family. Growing up in a house surrounded by books and seeing people
enjoying them made her to read herself. Dunmore, being enthusiastic about books shares that enthusiasm with her family. Helen’s parents never judged what she chose to read, but gave her the freedom to discover what she liked. As a child, Helen read and memorized a lot of poetry, which she continues to find extremely valuable. She was also keen on comics like Bunty and Judy because of their strong narratives. The first book she can remember being read to her was *The Wind in the Willows*. She liked books produced in interesting shapes and with pop ups, funny books, the fairy stories of Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen and Andrew Lang, classics like *A Tale of Two Cities*, true life adventures (Grace Darling, Scott of the Antarctic, Florence Nightingale) and Alison Utley’s *Little Grey Rabbit*, among many others. Like other children, she read in a very retentive way. She can still hear the words from some of those early books, like the Janet and John series, and can recall the excitement of actually reading for the first time.

Helen Dunmore has been influenced also by the writings of Mandelstam, Elizabeth Bowen, Elizabeth Taylor, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield and Charlotte Bronte. The contemporary novelists whose works inspire her writings are Julie Myerson, Barbara Trapido, Andrew Cowan, William Trevor, Chinua Achebe, Doris Lessing and Kingsley Amis. Dunmore finds hard to list them. There are so many writers whose work she has loved. Among novelists, Tolstoy and Turgenev were early, very important influences on her. “So were Doris Lessing, Evelyn Waugh, Virginia Woolf, Philipp Pearce, Kingsley Amis, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Bowen and hosts of others...”(Dunmore2)

In an interview, she says, “I read a lot of Russian fiction and poetry. Osip Mandelstam was one of the strongest influences on me; some of his poems are like talismans that you carry around with you. I don’t suppose you can write a novel about Russian wartime without thinking a great deal about Tolstoy. I’m always thinking about his books” (Dunmore 01). She read Pushkin, Anna Akhmatova, and Marina Tsvetayeva. Dunmore says, “Turgenev blends lyrically beautiful descriptions of place with biting social satire, while Tolstoy, you can read any number of times and always find something
Dunmore loves Turgenev. His sketches from a *Hunter’s Album* are one of her favourites of his works. She says, “It’s so sensuous, full of the smell, and touch and taste of the landscape. And it’s rather melancholy too, and realistic, packed with tiny stories which aren’t softened at all.” (Dunmore 03) Dunmore is impressed by comedy and perfect pitch of dialogue of Kingsley Amis, Evelyn Waugh and again Hilary Mantel, who is often extremely funny. Dunmore read and re-read the memoires of Hilary Mantel and Tim Lott. In the Hay Festival 2010, Helen Dunmore expressed herself that when writing *The Betrayal* (2010), she was wary of giving lines to real historical figures. Yet Hilary Mantel, Walter Scott Prize winner for *Wolf Hall*, has completely reanimated Thomas Cromwell in *Wolf Hall*. Hilary Mantel’s satiric vision, cool tone and her detached stance influence Dunmore.

4. **AWARDS AND HONOURS:**

Helen Dunmore has won several awards for her fiction and also for her poetry. Her second collection of poetry, *The Sea Skater* won the Poetry Society’s Alice Hunt Bartlett Award. *The Raw Garden* was a Poetry Book Society Choice. Her collection of poems for children, *Secrets* won the Signal Award for Poetry. *Bestiary* was shortlisted for the T.S.Eliot Prize. She has also won the Cardiff International Poetry Prize. ‘Dunmore gets a wonderful balance between delicate, exact, surprising language and very strong thought - which may be bitter, sardonic or violent, tender or wildly imaginative, but is always generous ... A lovely poetic electricity runs through her poems’ (O’Brien and Padel 01). Her poetry has been described as ‘At once intimate and strange ... Celebrations mingle with apprehensions throughout this volume, which in a sense lights candles for the human journey, its homecomings, its departures, its comforts, its finalities’ (Pegnall 01).

As with the magical realism of Margaret Atwood or Angela Carter, Dunmore conveys the sense of a world through the looking glass, equally intensely aware of the interiority of experience of living inside a female body, and the exterior world around her Award-winning novelist and poet Helen
Dunmore received first prize in the National Poetry Competition 2010 for her poetry, *The Malarkey*, described by the judge Ruth Padel as “very adept but quite unobtrusive- it’s not a flashy poem at all, but there’s a lot of integrity to it” (Padel 01).

Dunmore has won the society of Authors’ McKitterick Prize for her novel, *Zennor in Darkness*. *A Spell of Winter* won the inaugural Orange Prize for Fiction and brought what she describes as ‘a lot of very useful attention’. She believes the Orange Prize has succeeded in raising awareness of women writers and has raised the game of all literary prizes, although she recognizes that winning any award entails a certain amount of luck. *The Siege* was shortlisted for both the Orange Prize for Fiction, and Whitbread Prize for Fiction. Her latest novel, *The Betrayal* was published in April 2010. *The Betrayal* has just been long-listed for Britain’s Man Booker Prize. Helen Dunmore’s writing is known for its quite lucidity with an impressive aesthetic edge. Helen Dunmore took a step into rather different award territory after her fictional recreation of 1952 Leningrad under Stalin, *The Betrayal*, was shortlisted for the Orwell Book Prize 2011 for political writing.

Helen Dunmore’s work has been translated into twenty-five languages. Her novel, *The Siege* has been translated into Russian by Tatyana Averchina, and extracts have been broadcast on radio in St. Petersburg.

Helen Dunmore was the Chairperson of the Society of Authors in 2005-2006. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

5. AIMS & OBJECTIVES

The thesis aims to study major themes in Helen Dunmore’s novels categorized under war, historical and literary or of contemporary setting and additionally highlights various features of her writings. This thematic exploration is primarily meant to represent an analytic, comprehensive demonstration of the common features of her novels.
OBJECTIVES:

1. To reflect on the themes and contexts seen as appropriate in Dunmore's novels.
2. To identify major and minor themes in her war novels.
3. To note the major and minor themes in her historical novels pointing out the literary and cultural relevance.
4. To throw light on the themes in her novels of contemporary settings.
5. To produce an overview of available critical interpretive materials and sources;

6. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In spite of the substantial contribution of Helen Dunmore to British Novel in English, her novels have not been fully explored. No elaborate critical work is carried out on her novels. In terms of research she has remained completely neglected. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to fill in the lacuna and also to highlight how Helen Dunmore differs from the other contemporary British novelists as far as her themes are concerned.

7. HYPOTHESIS:

1. The present study assumes that the novels selected for the study offer different themes of war, historical and contemporary settings.
2. It also illustrates Dunmore's journey from historical events and personages to fantasy and grotesque.
3. It presupposes Helen Dunmore as a versatile writer.

8. RESEARCH WORK METHOD:

The thesis adopts three methods of research, an analytical technique that helps to present the nature and background of her novels and explore its different features of her craft, and an interpretative technique that verifies the major and minor themes in her novels and evaluative technique
for comparing and contrasting Helen Dunmore’s treatment to various themes and for determining the common and principal features of her novels.

9. **THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY:**

Helen Dunmore’s fictional career moves around war, historical, and literary themes. The **war novels**, she wrote are *Zennor in Darkness*, *The Siege* and *The Betrayal*. These novels deal with the themes of horror of war and siege, betrayal, food and starvation, love, fight to survive, along with the themes of hunger, cold and deprivation. *Zennor in Darkness*, set during the World War I, centres on three young women Clare Coyne, her cousin Hannah and friend Peggy, young women growing up in a rural community dominated by ties of family and duty. But the country villages of Cornwall, including the Zennor of the title, are slowly but irrevocably affected by the encroaching war. The war brings strangers to Zennor. Among them, D. H. Lawrence and his German wife Frieda who, hoping to escape the war-fever of London, find themselves the objects of the shifting, dangerous tide of scorn and gossip. *The Siege* sets during the World War II of 1941-42 when the starving city was under heavy bombardment from the German army. It is the story of the 900 day siege of Leningrad when so many thousands died of cold, starvation, and deprivation. *The Siege* is a bleak account of the siege of Leningrad seen through the eyes of a group of inmates forced to eat boiled leather to survive. It focuses on a small group of civilians trying to adapt to starvation, piercing cold and enemy bombardment. Their bustling, elegant city is on the brink of collapse and their daily routines and expectations have been shattered. Intense dramas are played out in the confined spaces of shabby apartments, bread queues, and the cab of a supply truck. *The Betrayal*, a sequel to *The Siege*, sets in 1952 and the last days of Stalin’s rule of terror. It is about random cruelty and persecution in what appears to be peace-time yet is anything but. It is a moving story about two young people trying to live an ordinary life in an extraordinary circumstances.

The **historical novels**, Dunmore wrote are *House of Orphans*, *A Spell of Winter* and *Counting the Stars*. Her historical novels deal with the culture,
language, and literature of concerned historical setting. There are the themes of orphanhood and parenthood, fight for survival, love and sexuality, war and betrayal, food and starvation. The novel, *House of Orphans* is partly a love story, partly a tragedy, partly a profound political meditation. The novel is set in Finland, at the beginning of the last century, when resistance to Russian rule was growing within the country. Dunmore’s heroine, Eeva, is the daughter of a Finnish revolutionary who passed on to her his own independent spirit before dying of TB, leaving her an orphan. Minna has wiped off the years of her childhood like a teacher wiping a slate with incorrect sums on it. Dunmore is particularly skilled at aligning the domestic with the political - spheres that are only artificially separated anyway and using the detail of the past to create a narrative that is complex and contemporary. Her *Spell of Winter* is indeed Gothic in tone. It is a novel about two incestuous children who try to parent themselves after their mother has left. It sets on an old English estate during the first twenty years of this century. Its theme is deep and dark family secrets which are gradually and ominously revealed. The theme of children losing parents, or vice versa, often seems to recur. In *Counting the Stars*, there are two stories, a love story and a murder, that are closely entwined. The hero of *Counting the Stars* is the Roman poet Gaius Valerius Catullus. He lived between about 84 and 54 BC, the age of Cicero, Suetonius and Caesar; (c84-54 BC) lived in the fading days of the Roman Republic. The novel is about his love affair with the woman believed to have featured in two dozen of his poems, whom he called ‘Lesbia’. Catullus was believed to have an older, married lover called Clodia Metelli. What make Dunmore’s *Counting the Stars* so memorable are the powerful vignettes she inserts into this narrative. Catullus’s visit to a poisoner in one of the least salubrious quarters of Rome is heavy with menace. The lovers’ excursion on a lake ends in a plunge into the water that is simultaneously comic, sensual and dangerous. Poet and cuckolded husband meet in the entrance to the husband’s richly decorated villa and find brief and unexpected common ground in the contemplation of a mosaic depicting the violent death of the hunter Actaeon, torn to pieces by his own hounds. At a party, a drunken
Clodia enjoys her own power as she parades one of her many toy boys before a tormented Catullus. Dunmore’s strengths as a novelist have always included her skill in sensuous description and her ability to convey the promises and the dangers of erotic love.

Dunmore’s literary novels are *Burning Bright*, *Talking to the Dead*, *Your Blue Eyed Boy*, *With Your Crooked Heart*, and *Mourning Ruby*. These contemporary novels expose the themes of love, urban corruption, sexual exploitation, social tensions and gross hypocrisy of society. She writes the passionate psychological thrillers also. The novel, *Burning Bright*, is about a 16-year-old prostitute caught in a triangle between her pimp and bondage-loving lover. *Talking to the Dead* is 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. In *Mourning Ruby* the theme is loss, mourning, recovery—on a personal level and much broader on public level. It takes a long time in one’s individual life and in broader, national life to come to terms with events. Her most recurring theme is that of sexuality, and the consequences of repressing it. Dunmore writes about women caught between passionate love and social repression. Her novels expose how social hierarchies and restrictions invade the most intimate parts of our lives, and how, on a personal level, women resist. In some of her novels, there is a strange combination of hallucinatory intensity and deprivation of wartime. History and memory, slipped family relationships, secrets, blood, madness, sweetness of life, change and death are the minor themes in her novels.

One of the aspects of her writing is the **political content**. All of Dunmore’s writing highlights political issues of the time, whether slavery or the tragedy of the war brides. 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.

What is ‘new’ in the contemporary historical novel is its treatment of history as a form of discourse. The contemporary view of history argues against conventional history writing, which is claimed to be shaped ideologically by the dominant discourse, and against its claim to represent historical events truthfully and objectively. In the hands of Dunmore, war and historical novels become liberating tools because historical fiction becomes a strong political resonance. If one of the driving forces in the writing of historical fiction is to give a voice to the ex-centric, then for a woman-author to write into being the unaddressed past and its muted subalterns, or to rewrite an established male-authored work, presents a challenge for both author and reader. In her historical writings, history has become more literary and literature more historicized.

The novels of Dunmore are studied in terms of how they highlight the silenced histories through rewriting historical facts within the different themes of the novels. Dunmore’s novels delve into the disturbing complexities of reality. *The Siege* abandons the imaginary worlds of her previous novels and instead offers up a taste of real events. Helen Dunmore’s novels deserve attention for two reasons: first, there is the finest juxtaposition of lyrical quality and perfect prosaic style. She relies on the power of language. “Words always had a power for me,” she says. “It was like a naturally musical child heading for the piano. My instrument was language, right from the start” (Dunmore 02). Second, the variety of themes she handles is amazing.

The study of Helen Dunmore’s writings clarifies the development of women’s social and historical representation. The intrinsic relation between historical and literary narratives is expressed by Hayden White:
“How a given historical situation is to be configured depends on the historian’s subtlety in matching up a specific plot structure with the set of historical events that he wishes to endow with a meaning of a particular kind. This is essentially a literary, which is to say fiction making, operation” (White 85).

This is the point where literary and historical narratives meet: both may be permeated by fiction and both may be read as legitimate ways of providing historical evidence. The exploitation of the psychological impact of war is recurrent in Helen Dunmore’s war novels. The innovative aspect of her psychological approach to historical characters like Stalin, Volkov as well as the English novelist Lawrence appear in her novels in order to make explicit the impact war had on people’s minds and psychological make-up. Through fictionalized dialogues between these and other “real-life” characters, Dunmore plays with the intersection of historical and literary narratives.

The evolution of women’s social roles during wartime is explained by her character, Anna Levin. Sociological grounds refer mainly to women’s insertion in war-related activities: political activists, Red Cross volunteers, ambulance drivers, spies, journalists, and munitions workers, for instance. The insertion of women into the labour force turned out to be an economically profitable enterprise. Sexual and moral values came into question. The different roles played by women during wartime are valuable for the collective memory, of which war narratives are a significant part. Anna Levin, who lives an intense psychological drama, is unable to display it due to social conventions. The evolution of women’s social roles, along with their response to the deaths of male relatives and lovers, often caused a change in their attitude, from despair to optimism.

The universal experience of human collapse, i.e., where the lives of men and women can be equally affected during wartime and their social roles, especially the ones delegated to women, evenly redefined. War places sexuality on a continuum of emotions such as vulnerability, helplessness, fear and the universal need to be loved and cared for: in the meeting of ‘lips’, the eroticism of greed are overwhelmed by the reassurances of affection. In
Zennor in Darkness, Clare Coyne, and her cousin Hannah and friend Peggy, young women growing up in a rural community are dominated by ties of family and duty. But the country villages of Cornwall, including the Zennor of the title, are slowly but irrevocably affected by the encroaching war. The war brings strangers to Zennor. D. H. Lawrence and his German wife Frieda hope to escape the war-fever of London as well as scorns and gossips of the people. The characters are brought together by the feeling of fear, a recurrent psychological consequence of the war experience. The Siege depicts small group of civilians adapting starvation, piercing cold and enemy bombardment. The city is on the brink of collapse. The daily routines and expectations of the civilians have been shattered. Told mostly through the perspective of 23-year-old Anna, the novel accounts the daily battle for survival undertaken by Anna and her family. Anna's father, wounded in battle, is slowly dying while her five-year-old brother battles hunger and asthma. Anna never lets risk stop her from finding food or wood for her family. She stands in line in the Leningrad winter for a few slices of bread, gets robbed for her firewood and sneaks into the countryside to dig up her family's vegetable garden. Yes, Anna is brave, but more than that, she is intent on survival. After having witnessed the cruelty of the war, they put life and death into perspective. Their experience of wartime impact is that of fear and despair. No one can tell what the future will be like or if there will be future at all. Literary writings may convey as much historical authenticity as historical narratives, in so far as emotional and personal experience is also valid from the historical point of view, although it is not susceptible to traditional historical analysis. Not only have women's social roles evolved since the First War but some change in women's attitude may also be triggered by that tragic event, especially regarding the rise of women's optimism towards the construction of a society with equal opportunities. After losing her brother to war, Katherine Mansfield seems to speak on behalf of these women and writes a dramatic entry, in her Journal, where she manifests her inspiring hope for a better future life:
I think I have known for a long time that life was over for me, but I never realized it or acknowledged it till my brother died. Yes, though he is lying in the middle of a little wood in France and I am still walking upright and feeling the sun and the wind from the sea, I am just as much dead as he is...Then why don’t I commit suicide? Because I feel I have a duty to perform to the lovely time when we were both alive (Cadogan and Craig 158).

Mansfield’s writing, in this passage, reveals what is perhaps the main reason why women tell war stories: they weave their stories, their narratives, in order to survive, or to keep living, in a world left by their men. The classic example of a woman’s narrative of survival is the One Thousand and One Arabian Nights’ female protagonist, Scheherazade, for whom the act of telling stories was the only way of keeping alive –or, at least, putting off her fate.

Concerning literary and historical studies, critic Linda Hutcheon argues that:

They [history and fiction] have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality (Hutcheon 105).

The contradiction appears to be dissolved by what Hutcheon defines as “sociology”:

History and fiction have always been notoriously porous genres... At various times both have included in their elastic boundaries such forms as the travel tale and various versions of what we now call sociology. It is not surprising that there would be overlappings of concern and even mutual influences between the two genres (Hutcheon 106).

By “mutual influences” it may be understood that writing about historical events does not necessarily dismiss fiction; in the same token, fiction writing may reveal some extent of historical accuracy. Hutcheon used the phrase “porous genres” appropriately, because it is not the same as to say that there
is a gap between history and fiction; instead, it suggests the complementariness between them.

Helen Dunmore’s novels show her mastery of spare yet rich (not flowery-poetic) language. In a recent Guardian interview she said, “Working as a poet has definitely helped me with the pacing in my novels. I’m very much one for the grip, the pull-through, that narrative energy and propulsion, and I think poetry teaches you about that” (Dunmore 01). Her style is one that: in a few words she can conjure as much information, character, plot movement, atmosphere and emotion as would take a lesser writer several clumsy pages of explication. She trusts her reader to be alert and credits her with intelligence and imagination enough to take an authorial hint. According to Nick Rennison, “…her novels have all shown a poet’s gift for language that combines vibrant imagery with precision of meaning and that can be either spare or richly sensuous as the occasion demands. Yet her books are in no way abstruse. Most deal with the tensions of sexual and familiar relationships, subtly exploring the pleasures, pains and betrayals inherent in them and often doing so through the use of elements of the suspense novel or psychological thrillers” (Rennison 46).

Dunmore’s work is distinctive as she deals with different themes, characters, settings, stories, and styles. With her lucid language, she allows her images speak for themselves. Her narrative technique is very illuminating as it reveals her different perspectives while dealing with varied themes. All these features of her writing place her different among her contemporary novelists.