

Research Paper - English



## Major themes in helen dunmore's "The Betrayal"

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**ABSTRACT:** "Play is the best thing that human beings do" says Helen Dunmore, one of the most prolific writers of later twentieth century. She is specially known as the creator of dream world. Her novels are the record of various aspects of life such as pleasure and pain, victory and defeat, triumph and tragedy etc. The present paper is an attempt made to examine the various themes depicted in her latest novel, The Betrayal.

**KEY WORDS:** English fiction, Helen Dunmore, The betrayal

### INTRODUCTION:

'The orchestra of someone's life is made up of so much different instrumentation, isn't it?' Says Helen Dunmore. 'My own view is that life is quite testing. When I talk to people, I always uncover the most extraordinary depths of experience...' (1)

The multi-faceted Helen Dunmore touches every aspect of human life and explores its several dimensions with great skill. She is specially known as the creator of dream world who dreams herself and makes others dream about their lives. 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.

Dunmore's novels deserve attention for the two reasons. First, there is the finest juxtaposition of lyrical quality and perfect prosaic style. Second, the variety of themes she handles is amazing. Her fictional career moves around historical, war, and contemporary themes. Therefore, I am of the opinion that her latest novel, The Betrayal should be taken scholarly note of. This article throws light on the major themes in The Betrayal.

The Betrayal (2010) is a worthy sequel to Dunmore's remarkable novel of ten years ago, The Siege. Both novels are set in Leningrad. The Siege sets during the horrific winter of 1941-42 when the starving city was under heavy bombardment from the German army. The Betrayal sets in 1952 and the last days of Stalin's rule of terror. The Siege told the horrifying story of the 900 day siege of Leningrad when so many thousands died of cold, starvation, and deprivation. The Betrayal is about random cruelty and persecution in what appears to be peace-time yet is anything but.

Betrayal, fight to survive, hunger, starvation, deprivation, memories of the siege, fear and terror of Stalin's Russia and tender love between Andrei and Anna are some of the themes reflected in Helen Dunmore's The Betrayal. It brilliantly shows the epic struggle of ordinary people to survive in a time of violence and terror.

## I

**THE THEME OF BETRAYAL**

The novel contains the theme of betrayal; both betrayal by the state, and the betrayal which occurs between people during times when there is a premium on information and denunciation.

The year is 1952. Leningrad and its population are recovering from war. The people of Leningrad are 'like children who cling to the skirts of a beautiful, preoccupied mother,' thinks Anna Levin. In a story driven by character, the city, too, is as much a character as a setting. 'We love it, but it doesn't love us.' It is a story of appalling loss of civilian life. It is a drama of betrayal on many levels. Neighbours inform one another and the workplace is a voluntary spies. Dunmore's heroine Anna Levin, in *The Siege*, reflected:

'These are hard times. You can't trust anyone, not even yourself'.

The sentiment was true not only of that grim novel, but of its sequel, *The Betrayal*, whose horrors are more sinister.

Among the city's forlorn children, Anna was familiar as a daughter of dissident writer. Her lover, Andrei was a medical student and her younger brother was Kolya. 'The characters had aged ten years with me', Dunmore notes. 'Politically it was a chaotic time. There was a febrile atmosphere, a constant fear of what might happen. And I liked the notion of how these people, who have already been tested by extremes, would cope'. (3)

*The Betrayal* opens with the sentence: It's a fresh June morning with a trace of humidity, but Russov is sweating. The son of a secret police

officer has been admitted to Andrei's hospital, and his colleague Russov, determined to hand the case on. 'No one makes a better enemy, than a man who has had to beg for your help,' Andrei realizes when Russov pleads him for the treatment of a young patient, Andrei is betrayed by a colleague who forces him into a highly dangerous relationship with a senior secret police officer, Volkov. Volkov, who has dealt out death and exile to thousands, is powerless in the face of his child's serious illness. He feels betrayed by his own mortality.

Volkov accuses Andrei betraying his trust by amputating his child's leg, an operation that did no good, as the boy is now dying of cancer. Andrei sacrifices his personal happiness because he wants to help his patient, but his altruism betrays him.

The historical "betrayal" was in West's supposed abandonment of Soviet States to the mercy of Stalin. But this novel is laden with possibilities for personal betrayal-the strange intimacy that develops between Andrei and Volkov, his nemesis and interrogator, a torturer, a murderer but also the father of a sick child.

Dunmore explores love and trust of every degree, between mother and child, brother and sister, friends and colleagues and, of course, lovers. The way in which the state and its henchmen threaten these relationships is shocking. This is, in fact, the ultimate betrayal. In the background there is always a central betrayal which is that of an entire people by a totalitarian dictatorship. Dunmore is very apt in choosing the title, *The Betrayal* and sets a society where "trust no one" was a creed to live by. She is successful in creating an atmosphere of stifling suspicion-

spy novel atmosphere.

## II

### THE THEME OF SURVIVAL

'Fight to survive' is another major theme in the novel, *The Betrayal*. In *The Siege*, the city's inhabitants, bombed and blockaded by German forces, struggled to survive the merciless winter of 1941-42. The strength of *The Siege* was its gripping combination of events (food queues, military patrols, children "processed" for evacuation) with harrowing domestic details: boiling a leather case for broth slurping wallpaper for its vitamins, burning family furniture and books to avoid freezing to death. *The Betrayal* continues to the same story. The story is told through the eyes of one family who are struggling to survive physically and psychologically through this period.

Thirty-three year old Anna is, now, a nursery teacher. Andrei is a young rheumatologist and pediatrician working in Leningrad hospital just after the terrible siege. Both are building a life while looking after Anna's 16 year old brother, Kolya. They are expecting a child of their own. But the past hovers everything they do and feel. They still hoard food in jars "for emergencies" and they keep their heads down and to themselves "just in case". Anna and Andrei are committed to their work but they keep their attention on family matters and pleasures of ordinary day-to-day matters and survival.

'We survived before, says Anna, 'We got through,' 'So we can again', she says.

Anna and Andrei plan a family, a new generation who will "only know about hunger

from books"- except books have been burned and Leningrad's writers, artists and musicians imprisoned. The Levin family bury manuscripts in their dacha's compost heap- may be one day there will be new growth, a new life. Anna is very much immersed in the physical world too- in her work with children, in her relationship with Andrei, in her household needs, in her love of the dacha and the garden she grows there. She takes pleasure in "the feel of a dress in which nothing has happened yet, so that for a moment you believe that anything might be possible."

The description of a chicken stew, a piece of hoard green cotton being made into a ball gown, a little cherry tree wrapped in muslin-all show their fight for survival and love for life.

We see kolya chopping wood, uprooting potatoes and watering little lilacs on the plot next to the dacha. Andrei is inspired by haunting memories of the scented air of the taiga with its smells of resin and the tang of the wild berries. Even Anna and Andrei's sex life is brilliant, 'the place where they are always together and always safe'.

Despite continual pressures, Anna attempts to maintain normality for her family. She struggles to protect her younger brother who is struggling like herself, to overcome the memories and effects of starvation during the siege. She is fostering Kolya's talent as a pianist and composer. There are intense pressures in their little two rooms flat where the neighbours are ever ready to denounce any sign of anti-social activity. It is a struggle to provide nourishing soups, make dresses and to soften with her feminine creativity,

Andrei's life. She is also desperate to conceive the child that she knows Andrei would deeply love them to have.

The man who haunted her father's nights is still alive. Thousands-millions-perish around him, but Stalin appears immortal.

By the time, Andrei is accused of being a 'murderer in white coat' part of an alleged conspiracy to systematically kill off high level government officials. Anna and Andrei are sent into tailspin of worry and prepare for the worst. Now Anna is most of the way through a pregnancy, a conception that happened after an evening at the hospital ball that was the highest point of their life. Now her child will be born without a father, and once again she'll left alone with a child.

"Her hair is parted by icy fingers. Her skin crawls. Her heart points in her throat...".

Anna has moved to safety at their dacha with her brother. There she gives birth to her daughter and names her Nadezhda. The novel focuses light on the enduring courage of Anna. At the end, we see nurturing kindness of Kostya, the elderly doctor and neighbor at the dacha who spreads the integrity of her personal warmth by simple gestures like lighting the iron stove and reassuring Anna with her own skilful infant care.

The Betrayal is a moving story about two young people trying to live an ordinary life in an extraordinary circumstances. Dunmore portrays their daily lives at work and at home. The novel gives in to a romantic drift, dwelling on love and loss with a survivors understanding that life is at its most beautiful when at its most ordinary. The

novel is not just the sequel of The Siege but a part of an ongoing saga of ordinary people struggling against a city's beautiful indifference, and clinging on for dear life.

### III

#### THE THEME OF FEAR AND TERROR OF STALIN'S RULE

'Life has become better, comrades, life has become more cheerful'. The monstrous absurdity of Stalin's 1935 statement to his people has been exposed not only in The Siege but in The Betrayal also.

The aged dictator, Josef Stalin is still alive, making life more cheerful for millions of his comrades by having them arrested on whimsical charges and either shot or sent to gulag. As the story develops, Dunmore builds the Soviet milieu as it is lived by the masses, as Andrei and Anna try to do: its communal apartments, its sharing of kitchens and bathrooms, its toilets overflowing its petty squabbles, its whispers, the way a sudden silence will descend on the dinner table as a car stops in the street outside at night. This is a kind of world in which the citizenship keeps its head down. The goal each day is to stay anonymous, to be just one of the crowds, mere figures in the landscape, huddled against the cold. They climb the stairs silently to their apartments, weary, but safe, pretending not to know how quickly home can be "cracked, open like an egg". Anybody can be out of favour in the blink of an eye. And everyone knows just whose eye it is that blinks. People are living under a tyrannical dictatorship.

Andrei and Anna's veneer of calm and happiness begins to splinter when he is forced to

treat the seriously ill child, Gorya. He is a child of a powerful figure, Volkov, 'One of those names that is spoken only in whisper'. A single act of kindness on Andrei's part sets in motion a series of terrible events. Andrei is well aware he has stepped into a noose: 'The favour of such a man is as random and potentially lethal as the cancer that brought the child to hospital in the first place.' The question is not whether, but when and how tightly that noose will be drawn.

At first Volkov is purely a source of fear. But when Volkov and Andrei meet, he finds both the embodiment of terror and the parent of a sick child. Their encounters have an intensity which takes the novel to some of its darkest places (4)

Andrei is suspended from his medical practice. The police arrest Brodskya. Shortly thereafter, in the night Andrei hears police boots on the stairs. The officers raid their home, breaking furniture, emptying pickle jars into the sink and confiscating their English dictionary. He is tortured to get him sign a confession.

In one of The Betrayal's most effective and affecting scenes, Anna was seen, after a brutal encounter with the secret police, leaning over her sink in despair. But at the same time nothing that "the tap has a crust of dirt around the bottom. You can't see it from above... she must clean more thoroughly".

In March 1953, Stalin's death is announced. Beria, head of the NKVD sets up an investigation into the "Doctors' Plot" and exonerates those doctors. In the following years, thousands of prisoners make their way back to the Soviet Union- one of them is Andrei.

Helen Dunmore does an excellent job detailing the constant fear of the people, their haunting memories of Hitler's siege of Leningrad, the years of Stalin's terror and Andrei's experience as a political prisoner.

#### IV

#### CONCLUSION

Helen Dunmore's latest novel, The Betrayal explores the major themes such as betrayal, fight to survival, and fear and terror of Stalin's rule.

It also reflects the theme of parenthood. Stalin plays the role of father of the people. Anna and Andrei long for a child. While Volkov, who is accustomed to power over life and death, is powerless in the face of his child's serious illness.

The Betrayal 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 is successful in exploring the minor themes such as hunger, starvation, deprivation, tender love between Anna and Andrei. Though Dunmore charts loss, transience and breakdown, she also chronicles everyday survival, the path from trauma to regeneration.

#### V

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