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CHAPTER 4

THE MENACE OF TERRORISM AND HOSTAGE CRISIS

It is not only the themes of ‘human relationship’ and ‘role of fate and destiny’ Ann Patchett has focused on in her fictional works; she has also given same room to the highly sensitive and political issues like terrorism and hostage crisis. Though a very young author, she has dealt with this theme in a way that can be expected only from a perfectionist. She has
intensely discussed this theme in her best novel *Bel Canto*. It represents some kind of last-minute view on western imperialism as an intact, invincible force, if not of nature, then certainly of culture. Terrorism as tamed by singing is not a motif which an author could or even should get away with in the post-9/11 climate, and this is where the ethical question raised by the epigraph comes back into argument. On one level, Patchett's novel is rather insensitive to present-day discourses on cultural contact and conflict, postcolonial developments, discourses of western hegemony and many other current concerns in and beyond the arts. At the same time it demonstrates a retreat from realism into an almost atavistic use of art as an escape route which can be found even in politically more conscious recent novels such as Ian McEwan's *Saturday*.

This modern suspenseful story was originally the outcome of the author’s inspiration from a real incident that took place in December 1996, when a group of fourteen terrorists took over the Japanese Embassy in Lima, Peru. The terrorists held seventy-two hostages for four months before government troops stormed the building and killed all the terrorists. One hostage and two soldiers were also killed during the exchange of fires. The author focuses not only on the political underpinnings of the hostage crisis,
but also on the kinds of relationships that might have developed among the hostages themselves and among the hostages and the terrorists during those four months of captivity. Patchett had read news reports that described the hostages and terrorists playing chess and soccer and ordering out for large pizzas. These details inspired the young mind of Patchett to write a book on this most talked of problem.

On the surface, Patchett’s life seems unrelated to the story she tells in this hair-stirring book; but she shares some of the feelings of her character Roxanne, who is adored by strangers who do not really know her. During interviews about Bel Canto, Patchett has talked about the disconnect she feels between her book tours, where fans greet her with adulation, and her normal life, where she sticks to an everyday routine, writing, taking care of her grandmother, and hanging out with her dog.

Most scenes in the book take place in the Vice President, Iglesia’s big house which has two floors. On the first floor is the living room, which is a large space where the hostages gather for the party. The room is sophisticatedly decorated with all the most important artwork. It is cleaned to the best of its ability because the government officials want to convince Mr. Hosokawa and the other businessmen to invest in their country. The first floor also contains a guest suite, which is where General Alfredo sleeps. On
the second floor is a variety of rooms. In a hallway near the kitchen is a narrow and twisting staircase that leads to the servants’ quarters, which contains a door to the nursery. The nursery opens up to the second floor, and at the third door past the bathroom is Roxane’s room. Mr. Hosokawa takes this path to see Roxane at night and Carmen takes the route in reverse to meet Gen. Surrounding the house is a garden with a ten-foot wall. There are two known ways to enter the garden. One is through the kitchen and onto the back porch while the other is through the front door and beyond a stone walkway. The garden has been prepared for the party and contains many beautiful plants. However, while the crisis is going on, no one is able to tend to the garden. By the time the hostages are allowed to enter the garden, the grass is high enough to brush against the people’s calves. The garden contains many plants, including jasmine vines and evening lilies. In the garden there is a curve in the wall that makes a pocket of grass and slender trees. It is impossible to see this spot from the house, and it is here that Gen and Carmen make love for the first time.

The attack of terrorists on the celebrating party comes just before the presidential address to the gathering. It all happens in the blink of an eye, thus leaving all the people confused and puzzled. It is this cut of lights that
sets the alarm bells for the innocent prisoners. Rohan Maitzen analyzes the situation:

In retrospect, we realize that this transformation captures the essence of the novel. But because this moment of intense aesthetic and erotic passion coincides with the moment the terrorists cut the lights, it initially seems associated with weakness or vulnerability, especially as the guests continue applauding. This impression builds as the guests in their party finery are surrounded by gun-toting guerillas who first take rough command of the house and then order their hostages to lie down; the guests are relieved, “like small dogs trying to avoid a fight.” Easy oppositions lurk, ready to cheapen the novel’s effects: music, refinement, civilization, under siege by bullets, brutality, savagery.

(Openlettersmonthly)

As the lights are on again, there pour in so many men from all directions loaded with heavy ammunition. Heavy boots and gun buts pound through vents, storm in through doors. People are thrown together and then just as quickly break apart in a state of animal panic. The presidential house seems to rise up like a boat caught inside the wide arm of a wave and flip onto its side. Silver ware flow into the air, the tines of forks twisting against knife blades, vases smash into walls. People slip, fall, run, but only for an instant, only until their eyes readjust to the light; and they see the utter uselessness of their fight. The scene seems to be from a horror movie where everything is smashed and everybody feels befuddled. Patchett talks about the heroic nature of the book:
I could more easily tell you how it's similar to my other novels. I think what's different is that *Bel Canto* is more heroic because the circumstances are more dire. I'd like to believe that if you took the characters from my other books and placed them in this novel they would have been equally heroic, but I don't know. Also, the narrative structure in this book is much more ambitious. I've always wanted to write a book with a truly omniscient narrative voice that switched easily from character to character. It's the thing I'm most proud of in this book and the thing that probably no one will notice. *(Book Browse)*

This sudden attack by the terrorists sends a signal of fear to all the people, including the important and highly influential figures like Ketsumi Hosokawa, the Japanese businessman for whom the party has been thrown; Roxane, the popular American soprano; and Gen Watanabe, the translator for Mr. Hosokawa. The people see the generals of the terrorist group with their mouths wide open with grief. Benjamin: raging shingles; Alfredo: mustache, first and second fingers missing on left hand; Hector: gold wire glasses that have lost one arm. With three elderly generals come fifteen soldiers ranging from twenty to fourteen. These eighteen people spread all over the hall indicating that they are the carriers of frustration and panic. They instruct the hosts and guests with their guns. They are wearing faded clothing in dark colours, many in the dull green of shallow, sludgy ponds, a handful in denim of black. Over their clothing they are wearing a second layer of weapons, sashes of bullets, flashy knives in back pockets, all
manner of guns, smaller guns holstered to thighs or sticking up hopefully from belts, larger guns cradled like infants, brandished like sticks. They wear caps with the bills pulled down, but no one in the hall is interested in their eyes, only their guns, only their shark-toothed knives. A man with three guns is recorded subconsciously as three men. There are other similarities between the men: they are thin, either from the wanting of blood or just the business of growing, their shoulders and knees poked at their clothing. They are also dirty, noticeably so. Even in the confusion of the moment every one could see that they are smudged and streaked, arms and faces and hands mottled in dirt as if they have arrived at the party by digging up through the gardens and dislodging a panel in the floor.

The situation becomes full of mystification and peripatetic. This entrance does not take more than a minute, and yet it seems to last longer than all four courses of dinner. There is time for every guest to consider a strategy, revise it thoroughly, and abandon it. The scene is so dangerous that husbands and wives have drifted to the opposite sides of the hall. Countrymen seek out their own places and stand in blocks, speaking rapidly to one another. The apprehension of the hostages is further intensified by the terrorist missing two fingers when he raises the large .45-caliber auto and fires two rounds into the ceiling. This fire causes a splattering of plaster to
get dislodged from the ceiling and fall down on the ground dusting a portion of the guests. At this foolish action, some of the women scream, either from the firing of the gun or the touch of something unexpected on their bare shoulders. “Attention” the man with the gun says in Spanish. “This is an arrest. We demand absolute cooperation and attention” (13).

The language barrier between General Alfredo and some of the hostages widens the communication gap between the two sides. Two-thirds of the guests look frightened, but a scattered third looks both frightened and all at sea. The word ‘atencion’ is repeated in several languages. General Alfredo anticipates his announcements bringing about a sort of pricked, waiting silence, but no silence comes. The whispering amongst the present ones courses him to fire into the ceiling again, carelessly this time, hitting a light fixture, which explodes. As the room becomes dimmer, the slivers of glass settle into shirt collars and rest on hair. “Arresto,” he repeats. “Detengase” (14).

Though the presence of the terrorists brings big trouble to the hostages, it also brings them closer. For example, the second fire by General Alfredo compels the accompanist of Roxane to wrap himself around her like a security wall, his body ready, anxious to step in front of any bullet that might stray in her direction. But in this as well we see a kind of fear that is
taking coils in his mind. The person who suffers the severest blows is
Hosokawa. He, even having a translator, does not find it easy to understand
what the general of the terrorists says. He, half a world away, in a country
twice as foreign, is remembering the Athens airport. That was the day he met
Gen, four years ago. Since then, Gen has been serving Hosokawa. Here as
well Gen is so central to the way he thinks now that Mr. Hosokawa forgets
sometimes he does not know the languages himself, that the voice people
listen to is not his voice. He does not understand what the man with the gun
says and yet it is perfectly clear to him. At worst, they are dead, at best; they
are looking at the beginning of a long nightmare. Mr. Hosokawa looks
around desperately for Roxane; but he can barely see her because her
accompanist has her so neatly wedged between him and the piano. Here
comes the time when the hostages come to know the purpose of the terrorists
behind the attack. “President Masuda,” the man with the mustache and the
gun says. “President Masuda, come forward” (18).

Getting no response from the people the man with the gun brings the
gun to the forth so that now it faces the crowd and particularly it appears to
be pointed at a blonde woman in her fifties named Elise, who is a Swiss
banker. She blinks a few times and then crosses her wide-open hands one on
top of the other to cover her heart, as if this is the place she is most likely to
be shot. She will offer up her hands if they may afford her heart a millisecond of protection. While this elicits a few gaps from the audience, it does little else. There is an embarrassing wait that rules out all notions of heroics or even chivalry, and then finally the Vice President of the host country takes a small step forward and introduces himself. “I am Vice President Ruben Iglesias,” he says to the man with the gun. “President Masuda was unable to attend this evening. He is not here.” The president’s voice is heavy and full of fear.

The brutality starts when Ruben Iglesias gets hit with a gun by General Alfredo. As Ruben shakes his head sadly, General Alfredo quickly turns the gun in his hand so that he now holds the muzzle rather than the handle. He brings the gun back in the air and hits the Vice President on the flat bone of his cheek beside the right eye. As the handle of the gun hits him, the small man is knocked to the ground. He starts bleeding in no time. It was only by chance that the President Masuda decided to stay home in order to happily play over the plot of tonight’s soap opera in his mind. Iglesias’s decision to replace President Masuda has cost him vastly. The terror and embarrassment that have been unleashed on him have damaged him in so many respects. The anguish of the terrorists does not stop here. The man with the gun goes further ad looks at the Vice President on the floor and, as
if liking the sight of him here, instructs the rest of the party to lie down. All
the people sink to their knees and then stretch out on the floor. “Face up,”
says the man with the gun.

Here, like in any other hostage taking drama, the people are forced to
do all the things as per the wishes of their captors. The people are clearly
divided into two groups: those who are standing and those who are lying
down. Instructions are given, those lying down are to remain quiet and still,
those standing up should check those lying down for weapons and of
secretly being the president. Those lying on the ground feel very nervous
and terrified because they can be shot without even the chance to run. They
can be stepped on or kicked easily. The boots that step around them, over
them, are old and caked in mud that flakes off into trails across the
elaborately patterned Savonniere carpet. For the women there is just the
slightest tapping around the skirts. Sometimes a boy will lean over, hesitate,
and pull away altogether. They find very little of interest, as this is a dinner
party. The terrorists, particularly the generals, are of awfully suppressive
nature. They cannot tolerate even a bit of talking between the hostages. For
instance when Gen, the translator, tries to talk to Mr. Hosokawa, General
Benjamin drops his rifle down to Gen’s chest and rests the muzzle there like
a walking stick. The round opening of the muzzle is barely bigger than one
of the studs on his shirt front and it makes a small and distinct point of pressure causing a small, piercing ache in his chest.

The whole palace is well fortified by the terrorists. Groups of boys with guns drawn out are dispatched to different corners of the house, down to the basement, up to the attic, out around the edge of the high stucco wall, to see if the president has hidden himself in the confusion. But the word comes back again and again that no one is there. Through the open windows comes the raucous sawing of insect life. In the living room of the Vice Presidential home, everything is still. The over suffusing calmness and no response from the hostages regarding President Masuda enrage General Benjamin. He sits down on his heels next to the Vice President, who is bleeding heartily into the dinner napkin which his wife, who lies beside him, presses against his head. A more sinister edge of purple is now ringing his ear. It looks nowhere near as painful as the inflammation of his face. He has to answer all the questions raised by the terrorists:

GENERAL BENJAMIN. Where is President Masuda?
VICE PRESIDENT. At home.
GENERAL BENJAMIN. Why did he not come this evening?
VICE PRESIDENT. He wanted to watch his soap opera. He wanted to see if Maria would be freed tonight.
GENERAL BENJAMIN. Why were we told he would be here?
VICE PRESIDENT. He had agreed to attend and then he changed his mind. (25)
This news of President Masuda not attending the party because of his favourite soap opera makes both the guests and the terrorists angry. But as it has been rightly said by the catholic priests that truth can set people free, proves to be true here. General Benjamin who was ready to make an example by dispatching the Vice President into the next world, changes his mind after hearing the soap opera story. He is left with nothing but to repent by remembering his five months of planning for this one evening to kidnap the President and possibly overthrow the entire government. They had attacked the party with the plan to take the President and be gone within seven minutes. They should be out of the city by now, speeding their way over the dangerous roads that led back to the jungle. But this determination of the terrorists gets dashed because of the absence of President Masuda from the scene. Though Masuda escapes the trial, others suffer beyond all limits. As the night approaches, the situation becomes more complicated and grimmer for the hostages. The rest of the world follows its routine, but these people’s destiny has been written with a broken pen. The things like tree frogs and locusts and the metallic clicking of guns become a sign of the approaching problems the hostages will have to experience. People try to sleep but are not able to sleep more than ten or twenty minutes. Even asleep they remain obedient and stay flat on their backs. All night long the muddy
boots step over them, between them. The Author’s description of this scene is pictographic enough:

When the guests lay down the night before there had been a great deal of drama, which served as a distraction to what might happen, but by morning fear had coated the inside of every mouth. They had been awake thinking over the alternatives, which did not seem good. The rough brush of beards had sprung up during the night and eye makeup had been smeared from crying. Dinner jackets and dresses were crumpled, shoes were tight. Backs and hips ached from the hard floor and necks were locked straight ahead. Without exception, every last person on the floor needed to use the facilities. (31)

Amongst the hostages, it is Mr. Hosokawa who has the central role to play as far as the agony of the crisis is concerned. In addition to suffering what the others suffer; Mr. Hosokawa bears the terrible burden of responsibility. All of these people have come for his birthday party. Thus by agreeing to a party under what he knew to be false pretence, he has contributed to the endangerment of every life in the room. What disturbs Mr. Hosokawa the most is the question of Roxane, the great soprano’s safety. He repents his decision of seeing and talking to Roxane face to face and asks himself why he thought it would be any better if he could stand close enough to smell her perfume. Hosokawa’s worry about Roxane’s safety is genuine; but no one is going to shoot a soprano. She is prepared to be nice, to let her hand be held, but when the time is right she will be the one to get away. She
is sure of it. She smiles at the boy who opens the door to the bathroom for her. She half expects he will follow her inside, and when he does not she locks the door, sits down on the toilet, and cries, great, gulping sobs. She wraps her hair around her hands and covers her eyes. God damn her agent who said this was worth all the money! This kind of torture of the sophisticated people has been a general phenomenon during attacks and rebellions.

What gives some hope to the hostages here is the arrival of Joachim Messner, the man from the International Red Cross. After the preliminary introduction between Messner and Gen, the earlier asks the latter to tell the terrorists that he will act as their liaison. What hinders the conversation here is the language used by Messner. He speaks in French which is strongly opposed by General Alfredo who wants Messner to speak everything in Spanish. Finally the quarrel between Messner and General Alfredo is settled on the condition that Gen will translate what Messner says into Spanish. The following conversation between Messner and General Alfredo is an encouraging move towards finding some solution to the crisis:

MESSNER. What we want, of course, is the unconditional release of all the hostages, unharmed. What we will settle for at present are some of the extras. This is too many people. You’re probably out of food now or you will be by tonight. There’s no need for this many. I say release the women, the staff, anyone who is sick, anyone you can do without. We’ll start there.
GENERAL ALFREDO. In return?
MESSNER. In return, enough food, pillows, blankets, cigarettes. What do you need?
GENERAL ALFREDO. We have demands.
MESSNER. I’m sure you do and I’m sure they’ll be heard. What I’m telling you is that this is untenable to everyone. Release the extras now, the ones you don’t need, and it will be taken as a goodwill gesture. You establish yourself as reasonable people. (42)

Through this positive conversation between Messner and the Generals of the terrorists the author wants to convey that things can be brought back to normal even when we are in a dire situation like a terrorist attack. Messner’s offer of providing basic amenities and necessary things in exchange of some of the hostages is almost accepted by the Generals. What disturbs this process is the intervention by Ruben Iglesias, the Vice President. His suggestion of releasing the women and extras makes General Benjamin angry. He lifts one finger and pokes at the blood stained dinner napkin the Vice President holds against his face. He gets so furious that he refuses even to allow Messner to call in a medic. It is not only the captives who are agonized here but the terrorists also undergo the same dilemma. The young terrorists, for example, have to feel the pinch of this adversity. They keep on standing with their guns at least 16 hours a day. They are just like dummies having no response to any activity or question. When Father Arguedas, for example, calls a terrorist boy ‘son’, he gives no response.
After being called time and again, he whispers to Father Arguedas that he is not allowed to talk to the hostages. Being inspired by Father Arguedas, Victo Fyodorow, a Muscovite gives into himself and lights up a cigarette, even though all lighters and matches were to have been surrendered. He blows his smoke straight up to the ceiling. He is forty-seven years old and has been smoking regularly since he was twelve, even in hard times, even when decisions have to be made between cigarettes and food. Seeing Fyodorov smoking, General Benjamin snaps his fingers and one of the minions rushes forward to take Fyodorov’s cigarette away, but Fyodorov only inhales. He being a big man, even lying down, even with no weapon, saves the cigarette itself. He looks like the one who will win the fight. “Just try,” he says to the soldier in Russian. The boy, having no idea about what has been said, is unsure of how to proceed. He tries to steady his hand when he withdraws his gun and points it at Fyodorov’s middle in a halfhearted way. “This is it!” Yogo Ledbed, another Russian and a friend to Fyodorov, says. “You will shoot us for smoking!” (56).

What we generally see in most of the terror attacks and hostage crisis is the death of innocent people. The same thing happens here with the innocent accompanist of Roxane. He is the first victim of this unforeseen dilemma. His untimely death causes a lot of emotional damage to the other
hostages who start anticipating the same demise for themselves. The suffocation and the embarrassment come so heavily on this person that he finds it too difficult to survive here. Who suffers the most because of this death is Roxane who has always been with this unfortunate man. She takes in her hands the hand that his mother has been so careful with, the hand she watched play Schumann lieder hour after hour without tiring. The author’s description of the death scene of the accompanist is vivid enough to clearly illustrate the gravity one can feel after seeing him lie, utterly unconscious, on the ground:

The hand was cold already, and the colours of his face, which hadn’t seemed right for hours, were quickly becoming very wrong, yellow around the eyes, a pale lavender creeping up near his lips. His tie was gone, as were the studs from his shirtfront, but he still wore his black tails and white waistcoat. He was still dressed for performance. Never for a minute had she thought he was a bad man. And he had been a brilliant pianist. It was just that he shouldn’t have waited until they were sealed up in that plane to tell her how he felt about her, and now that he was dead she wouldn’t even hold that against him. (81)

Before the death of the accompanist no one liked him; but now all the men have left their wall and come to the side of the room, where they stand, more or less shoulder to shoulder with the terrorists. Now they feel the loss of him. Even the death of this person does not deter the terrorists from their
sinister goal. They rather want to use it as an opportunity to threaten the government:

GENERAL BENJAMIN. Now a man is dead!
GENERAL ALFREDO. It isn’t if men haven’t died. We are not here to kill these people. We are here to take the President and to go.
GEN. They’re considering shooting him.
ROXANE. He’s dead.
GEN. Difunto.
ROXANE. You understand this. And bullet that goes into that man goes through me first. (84)

Roxane confesses that the accompanist has died for her, so she would also die for him. She requests the generals to send his body home without further slicing it into pieces. How she feels and behaves at this crucial time has been beautifully described by the author:

A light perspiration had come up on Roxane Coss’s forehead, making her glow like Joan of Arc before the fire. When she was completely finished she took a breath, fully re-inflating her massive lungs, and then sat down again. Her back was to the generals and she bent forward to lean her head against the chest of her accompanist. Resting on his still chest, she drew herself back into composure. She was surprised to find his body comforting and she wondered if it was just that she could like him now that he was dead. Once she felt she was herself; again she kissed him to reinforce her point. His lips were slack and cool above the hard resistance of his teeth. (84-85)

What this passionate love of Roxane for the accompanist affects the most are the feelings of Mr. Hosokawa and General Benjamin. Mr.
Hosokawa steps forward, reaches into his pocket, and extends his handkerchief to Roxane. Seeing this touching exchange, General Benjamin asks all the people to go back in order to avoid another touching exchange. He goes and sits down in one of the large wing-backed chairs near the fireplace and lights a cigarette. There is nothing to do. He could not strike her the way he should have; surely there would have been an insurrection in the living room and he is not certain that the younger members of his army will not shoot in her defense. What he is not able to understand is the grief he feels for the accompanist. He thinks that Alfredo was right; it was not as if this was the first person to die. Most days it seems that half the people he knew are dead now. The thing that disturbs him the most is that the people he knew had been/were murdered, slaughtered in a host of ways, and this man, the accompanist, has simply died. This thought has been preventing him from sleeping well at night. Somehow, these two things do not seem exactly the same. He thinks of his brother in prison, his brother, as good as dead, sitting day after day in a cold, dark hole. He wonders if his brother could stay alive a little while longer, may be just a day or two, until their demands were met and he could be released. The accompanist’s death has created a big commotion in his mind. He, in the remembrance of his lovely brother, forgets everything and orders all to get lost of his eyes. All the
hostages step away. Even Roxane gets up and leaves her corpse as she is
told. She seems tired now. Benjamin commands his troops to resume their
positions. The guests are to go and sit and wait.

The things used for decoration have now started fading. Everything is
slack now. The huge arrangements of flowers that are placed around the
room are already wilting. The half-empty glasses of champagne that sit on
end tables and sideboards are flat and warm. The young guards are so
exhausted that some fall asleep against the wall and slide down to the floor
without waking. The guests stay in the living room, whispering a little but
mostly being quiet. They curl into overstuffed chairs and sleep. They do not
test the patience of their guards. They mind nothing. This description of the
plight of the hostages reminds the reader of terrorist’s attacks where
everything is left in limbo.

The death of the accompanist does not go waste though. The terrorists
have become nervous, and so they decide to make the list of the persons they
have to release. They try to get rid of more hostages who might be dying.
Another reason of their frustration is the noise created by the crowd outside.
As the relatives of the hostages come to know about the death of the
accompanist, they start crying. “Mur-der! Mur-der!” From the streets there
comes constant barrage of bull-horned messages and demands. Under this
immense pressure, the terrorists are forced to hold an emergency meeting in which it is decided that after taking complete and true information about all the hostages, some will be released on condition. The decision is taken that 40 hostages will be freed. The list does not include only the names of the hostages to be released but also other things. The terrorists want something in return. They prepare another list including money, a plane, and safe transportation to HC plane, etc. It also includes some items as well, as pillows (58), blankets (58), toothbrushes (58), fruit (mangoes bananas), cigarettes (20 cartons filtered, 20 cartons unfiltered), bags of candy (all types, excluding licorice), bars of chocolate, sticks of butter, newspapers, and a heating pad.

As the news goes out to the waiting relatives of the hostages, all try their best to provide all the items immediately to the terrorists. No one wants to wait until morning and risk the possibility of someone changing his mind. All the guests are herded together into the dining room to hear the hostage list and release list. There is a great sense of excitement and uncertainty all over the room. It is just like a cakewalk, a game of musical chairs in which people are randomly rewarded or punished and they are each one glad to take their chance at the wheel, even those like Mr. Hosokawa and Simon Thibault, who must know they do not have a chance of going home. They,
too, stand with the rest of the men, their hearts beating wildly. All the people think that Roxane will surely be released. They will miss her, they are missing her already, but everyone wants to see her go. They call through the names and tell the hostages to go to either the left or the right, one can almost tell from the cut of the tuxedo that will be staying. A great wall of darkness comes from those who can now reasonably assume their fate; it pulls them away from the lucky hilarity of the others. On one side, men deemed less important are going back to their wives, will sleep in the familiar sheets of their own beds, will be greeted by children and dogs, the wet and reckless affection of their unconditional love. But thirty-nine men and one woman on the other side are just beginning to understand that they are digging in, that this is the house where they live now, that they have been kidnapped. The announcement by the terrorists that 40 guests will not be released spreads like a grapevine. The sheer despondency and disappointment can be seen on the faces of those who have to stay and wait for their turn to be freed. Though the decision has been taken against the wish of these forty persons, they have some reason to cheer about and enjoy. They have Father Arguedas on their side. This man always remains sanguine and often finds cause to smile. He does not seem to be a hostage, but someone hired to make the hostages feel better. He carries out this job with
great earnestness. He opens his arms and puts one hand on Mr. Hosokawa’s shoulder and the other on Gen’s; then he dips his head down slightly and closes his eyes. It may be that Father Arguedas does it in order to pray but he never forces others to join him. “Take heart,” Father Arguedas says before pressing on in his rounds. “A good boy,” Mr. Hosokawa says (105).

The standoff goes on and completes its first week of turmoil and hustle-bustle. As it falls into second week, both the hostages and the terrorists start showing some flexibility in their stands. The hostages start behaving normally. To rejoin the story a week after Mr. Hosokawa’s birthday party has ended seems as good a place as any. That first week was only details any way, the tedium of learning a new life. Things were very strict in the beginning. Guns were pointed, commands were given and obeyed, people slept in rows on the living-room carpet and asked for permission in the most personal of matters. And then, though very slowly, the details began to fall away. And now, people stand on their own. They brush their teeth without asking; have a conversation that is not interrupted. They are now free to go to the kitchen and make a sandwich when they are hungry.

The terrorists show a peculiar fondness for Joachim Messner because he is not only the in charge of negotiations between the terrorists and the
government officials but also responsible for bringing all supplies to the house. It is this person who has instilled some confidence in the guests. It is he who has brought their bread and butter to the door. With Messner doing the work of a mediator, the security has barely pulled the second hand forward on the clock and yet looks at all that has been accomplished. To have gone from guns being pushed into backs to most of the guns being locked up in a broom closet has taken no less than a year; but the captors already know the hostages will not mount an insurrection and in return the hostages know, or almost know; they will not be shot by the terrorists. The guards have not been put completely off duty. Of course they are still vigilant of the activities of the hosts and the guests. Two boys are patrolling outside in the garden and three are circling the rooms of the house, their weapons pointed out like canes for the blind persons. The Generals continue to give them orders. One of the boys is ordered to take a little poke at one of the guests with the muzzle of his gun and tell him to go to the other side of the room for no reason at all other than the pleasure of seeing them move. At night there are sentries; but by twelve o’clock they have always fallen asleep. They do not wake when thin weapons slip down from their fingers and clatter on the floor. For the guests of Mr. Hosokawa’s birthday party it is like a nightmare in which they see themselves jailed without committing any
crime. Most of the day is spent wandering from window to window, sometimes playing a hand of cards or turning the pages of a magazine, as if the world has become a giant train station in which everything is delayed until further notice. It is of course this absence of time that has left everyone confused. In fact, these are the men who are largely unfamiliar with the concept of free time. All are not able to utilize or enjoy it. The person who finds it awfully difficult to live in such a condition of immobility is Mr. Hosokawa who has never led a static life. He has always been a dynamic figure in building his giant company. He usually sits down and taps the tip of his pencil against his pad. He looks to be extremely ambitious. He has no work to do now but to learn some words of Spanish language a day.

The ugly nature of this attack shows up the real picture of the tyranny that is unleashed on children of 14 to 18 years old who have taken up guns not intentionally but because of impassion of false dreams of freedom and money through ransom. These children have been brought into this profession of terror not by the consent of their hearts but because of their infatuation for heroic life. The plight of these underage guerillas has been evidently described by the novelist:

The ones who were actually the youngest were terrifying in their youth. Their hair had all the weight and glass of children’s hair. They had the small shoulders of children. They stretched their little hands around the
butts of their rifles and tried to keep their faces blank. The hostages stared at the terrorists, and the longer they looked, the younger the terrorists became… Some of them liked being soldiers. They continued to carry their guns. They menaced the adults with the occasional shove and hateful glower. Then it seemed that armed children were a much more dangerous breed than armed adults. They were moody, irrational, and anxious for confrontation. (110-111)

These children have been the puppets in the hands of their handlers. Though very much aware of this fact, they are helpless to go otherwise. They are also enthusiastically interested in asking the question- “Where are you from?” which they rarely get an answer to. It is Oscar Mendoza, one of the hostages, who becomes the symbol of loss and hopelessness here. He loses all hopes of survival in these harsh circumstances. But as we proceed we find that very shortly he becomes positive about his life:

VICE PRESIDENT. You look bad. All this talk of love isn’t agreeing with you.
OSCAR MENDOZA. When will we get out of here?
VICE PRESIDENT. Get out of here? You’re the one who said we would be shot.
OSCAR MENDOZA. I’ve changed my mind. No one is going to kill me. I may kill someone, but no one is going to kill me. (122)

Ruben sits down beside him and leans his good cheek against his friend’s broad shoulder. He promises not to complain about Mendoza’s inconsistencies. He tells Mendoza that he likes this talk better anyhow and suggests assuming a better life ahead. He requests Mendoza to sit up again
and wait there until he brings some ice for him from the kitchen. As the Vice President and Oscar Mendoza are busy in talking to each other, Roxane also joins them. She regrets a lot for not practicing singing for several days. She looks to be a plain lady now because all of her makeup is gone now. For the first few days she bothered to go to the lavatory and put on lipstick from the tube she has carried in her bag; but now she has forgotten all this.

The generals have doubled the night watch and guard duty. They have ordered the soldiers patrol the house in pairs and sent two more soldiers outside to walk along the edge of the yard in the drizzling rain. They have their rifles loaded and hold them up as if they are looking to shoot a rabbit. Messner, a gentleman by nature, submits to this drill with great patience. He opens his brief case and slips off his shoes. He holds his arms out straight to either side and moves his sock feet wide apart so that the strange little hands can rummage around his body. As one of the terrorists tickles him on the ribs, he brings his arm sown sharply. “Basta!” he says. He has never seen such an unprofessional group of terrorists. It is a complete and utter mystery to him how they have ever managed to overtake the house. General Benjamin swats Ronato, the boy who has tickled Messner, and takes his gun away from him. All he has hoped for is some semblance of military order:
GENER BENJAMIN. There is no call for that. We are growing tired of this. We want to know why your people cannot find resolution. Must we start drilling hostages to get your attention?
MESSNER. Well, first off, they are not my people. Nor is it my attention you should be trying for. Don’t kill anyone for my benefit. You have my complete attention. I should have gone home a week ago.
GENERAL BENJAMIN. We all should have gone home a week ago. But we have to see our brothers released. (136)

For General Benjamin this meant both his philosophical comrades and his literal brother, Luis; Luis, who committed the crime of distributing flyers for a political protest and is now buried alive in a high-altitude prison. Before his brother’s death, Benjamin had not been a general at all. He had taught grade school. Messner has belief but only in Benjamin and considers him to be a reasonable man, possibly even intelligent. Still, he works hard to prevent any feeling of real fondness for him, for any of them, captors or hostages. Fondness often prevents one from doing the most effective job. Besides, Messner is aware of the fact that such stories always end badly. So it is better to avoid much personal involvement. The time Messner leaves, there is a lingering sadness in the house that can last for hours. It is very quiet inside and no one listens to the tedious messages the government officials continue to broadcast from the other side of the wall. “Hopeless, surrender, will not negotiate.” It drones on until the words simply break down into a dull buzz. It is just like the angry sound of hornets scouring the
The hostages are shocked and may be thinking what prisoners feel like when the visiting hour is over and there is nothing left to do but sit in their cell and wonder if it is nevertheless dark outside. They are still deep in their afternoon bout of depression, still thinking about all the elderly relatives they never go to visit.

The arrival of the music box for Roxane is the turning point in the novel. It is this time when the terrorists show some sympathy with Roxane by offering her the box. The plot can obviously be divided into two distinct sections: before the box and after the box. Before the box, the terrorists control the Vice President’s home. They do not believe in Roxane’s infatuation for music. They always try to pressurize her to sing. It all happens because of the frustration the terrorists are suffering from now. The utter failure of their mission seems less overbearing to them now and many nights they sleep almost in peace. General Benjamin continues to mark off the days on the dining-room wall. They have more time to concentrate on negotiations. Among themselves they speak as if the singing has been part of their plan. It calms the hostages. It focuses the soldiers. It also has the remarkable effect of quelling the racket that comes from the other side of the wall. They can only assume that with the windows open the people on the streets can hear her because the constant screech of bull horned messages
can stop as soon as she opens her mouth to sing; and after a few days the bullhorn does not come back at all. They imagine the street outside. It is packed with people, not one of them eating chips or coughing, all of them straining to listen to the voice they have heard only on records and in their dreams. It is a daily concert the Generals have arranged, or so they have come to believe. It is a gift to the people, a diversion to the military. They have kidnapped her for a reason, after all. They use all tactics to make her sing. But General Benjamin, despite his occasional participation in the delusions at hand, knows whatever they get from Roxane is something to be grateful for:

BENJAMIN. I don’t think we should ask.
HECTOR. We won’t be asking. We will be telling.
BENJAMIN. Music, I believe, is different. That’s what I understand. We have set this up exactly right, but if we are to push…. We could wind up with nothing.
ALFREDO. If we put a gun to her head she would sing all day.
BENJAMIN. Try it first with a bird. Like our soprano, they have no capacity to understand authority. The bird doesn’t know enough to be afraid and the person holding the gun will only end up looking like a lunatic. (165)

This argument between General Benjamin and General Alfredo shows an apparent rift at least between the ideas of the two senior most members of the group. Alfredo’s haughtiness to bully Roxane for singing just does not pay off. It rather makes the singer adamant not to concede to any kind of
torture and humiliation. She refuses clearly to sing under any kind of pressure whatsoever. It is the gentle effort of General Benjamin that makes her ready to sing. It is humanity not terror that leaves any effect on her. The courage she shows here exhibits the firmness of a true brave person in hard times. Another character that shows a lot of courage is that of Vice President Iglesias. Though the situation is of adverse nature, he does not back down on his duty as a host; because it is his house that has been under siege for so many days. He takes it as a bad sign that the people who surrounded the house are growing bored with their kidnapping. The question that pinches him time and again is how long these crises ever last. The situation has already crawled past its second week. The Vice President imagines his group as the survivors of a shipwreck who watch helplessly while the last search-and-rescue helicopter spins north towards the mainland. The evidence is in the food. At first it has all been prepared, sandwiches of casseroles, of pulled chicken and rice. Then it comes in needing some assembly, bread and meat and cheese wrapped on separate trays. But this, this is something else entirely. Fifteen raw chickens, pink and cold, their stomachs greasing the counter, boxes of vegetables, bags of dried beans, tins of shortening; certainly it is enough food. The chickens appear to have been robust, but the question is how does one effect the transformation? How what does is here
become dinner? Ruben believes that it is his responsibility to answer these questions; but he knows nothing of his own kitchen. He wonders if his wife would have known. Truthfully, they have been taken care of for too long. He has been useful in society; but as far as household matters are concerned he has become some kind of fancy lapdog. Not one thing in the house demands his attention, not one object asks for his intercession. Even his own children are bathed and brushed and put to bed by lovely haired hands. It is perfect, always and completely perfect. Finding no way to prepare food, Ruben Iglesias requests some help from Roxane in cooking something.

Though Iglesias’s request to Roxane for tips on cooking food is not paid attention to; he gets another cook in Simon Thibault. The three of them Gen, Thibault, and Iglesias walk to the kitchen, making their way through the maze of men and boys who loiter in the great hall of the living room. Thibault immediately goes to the vegetables. “This is a good kitchen,” he says. “Let me go your pans.” Iglesias’s intense desire to serve his guests is praiseworthy. It is his sweet nature that brings the hostages and the terrorists on the same table to share food and play chess. Though General Benjamin offers help in preparing food, he does not allow even a knife inside the kitchen. It appears that all the choices of the hostages have been taken away locked in a house with an armed teenage boy pressed sullenly against every
door. No freedom, no trust, not even enough freedom or trust to deserve a little knife with which to cut up a chicken. The simplest things they believe, that they have the right to open a door, that they are free to step outside, are no longer true. For a long time the guests were allowed only in limited areas of the house but now as the things are loosening up the access to other areas is sporadic.

Thus, with the passage of time, the terrorists and the hostages begin to live happily. They start playing together. They decide to play a football match and go to the ground to execute it. The boys guarding the house climb the ivy banks at the edge of the yard. They lean their guns against the stucco, and join the game. The runners give up their running to play. “Una Voce Poco Fa” still bounces around in their heads, and even though they cannot hum it, they chase the ball to the rhythm of the ball, Beatriz takes the ball away from Simon Thibault and kicks it over to Jesus who has a clean shot to take it past two chairs that are set up as the goal, and the General yell to him, “Now! Now!” As the match is going on well between the terrorists and the hostages, the Government soldiers break into the house. First of all, Roxane screams seeing a man she does not recognize walking quickly into the room. She gets terrified by the way he comes towards them. Cesar jumps up from the piano bench where he has been sitting and before he has gotten anywhere
close to the door he is shot. He falls straight forward, not putting out his hands to save himself, not calling for anyone to help. Roxane crouches beneath the piano, her voice sounding out the alarm. She crawls toward the boy who she is sure is meant to be the greatest singer of his time. She covers his body with her own, lest something else should happen to him. She can feel her warm blood soaking her shirt, wetting her skin. She takes his head in her hands and kisses his cheeks.

The standoff is going to be ended now but with so many heart tearing and sympathy causing leftovers. At the very sound of the sheet, it seems the man with the gun divides, first into two, and then four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four. With every loud pop more soldiers come and they spread through the windows, pour through the doors into the garden. No one can see where they have come from, only that they are everywhere. They cover the playing field while the ball is still rolling away from the game. The guns fire over and over and it is impossible to say if the ones who are dropping are trying to protect themselves or if they have been hit. It is an instant and in that instant everything that has been known about the world is forgotten and relearned. The men are shouting something, but with the rushing of blood in his ears, the sickening spin of adrenaline, the deafness left over from the gunfire, not even Gen can understand them. He sees General
Benjamin who is looking back towards the wall, possibly gauging its height, and then with a shot Benjamin is down, the bullet catching him squarely in the side of his head. In one shot he loses both his life and the life of his brother, Luis, who will soon be taken from prison and executed for conspiracy. General Alfredo has already fallen. Houmberto, Ignacia, Guadalupe, all are dead now. Lother Falken, Father Arquedas, Bernardo, Segio and Beatriz put their hands up. General Hector, too, starts to put up his hands but he is shot before they have passed his chest.

The government soldiers attack the house in a well organized way. They cut the group apart as if they know everyone very intimately. They pick the terrorists very easily out of the hostages. The situation becomes extremely chaotic and hazardous. There are dead bodies and bloodshed all around. Beatriz tries to avoid the eventuality by holding her hands up straight above her head. There are all around her the people she has known for a long time now. There is General Hector laying on his side, his glasses gone, and his shirt a soggy mess. There is Gilbert, who once she kissed out of boredom. He is flat on his back, his arms stretched out to the sides as if he means to fly. She feels afraid of the dead bodies now, and feels more comfortable with the strangers who are shooting because she and they are all alive. She hears Oscar Mendoza calling her name, “Beatriz! Beatriz!” and
she opens her eyes. He is coming towards her, his arms stretched out. He is running towards her like a lover and she smiles at him. Then she hears another gunshot but this time it knocks her off her feet. A pain explodes up high in her chest and spits her out of this terrible world. Seeing Beatriz dead; Gen calls for Carmen. “She is my wife! She is my wife,” he cries into the bedlam, because that is the only plan he has ever devised, even though he has never asked her to marry him, or asked the priest to bless them. She is his wife in every way that matters and that will serve her. But nothing can save her. She is already dead, killed right at the start. One shot fixed Carmen and Mr. Hosokawa together in a pairing no one had considered before.

In the conclusion it can be said that Patchett has described a typical situation in a comprehensive way. Through her writing on terrorism and hostage crisis, she has highlighted a very burning issue that is causing a lot of damage to the world nowadays. Almost all the terrorists are killed at the end. But some good characters, like Mr. Hosokawa, also have to pay the price by losing their lives for committing nothing wrong whatsoever. Rohan Maitzen has precisely judged the universality of the theme of this novel:

As I noted, it’s always just “the host country”; the terrorists’ grievances and demands are boilerplate, even stereotyped; the government is an implacable yet vague force against them. This separation from real-world politics is necessary to preserve the fable-like sensibility of the novel, yet it undermines its credibility and perhaps even its own arguments: the
solution the novel implicitly proposes is, after all, to real-world problems, isn’t it? But to imagine a way out of them, it has to leave them altogether behind, or reduce the conflict to the simplistic oppositions between beauty and power, art and guns, that seemed to have been avoided earlier: the only difference at the end is that by and large the terrorists too have been converted, seduced away from politics by love and opera.

(*Openlettersmonthly*)

By taking up the hugely relevant theme of terrorism and hostage crisis, Ann Patchett has really done a commendable job. The discussion on these burning issues becomes even more important in the present scenario when the world is facing huge difficulties in tackling with the agents of terror. A lot of innocent people are being killed in different terror attacks all over the world. The author wrote this book just before the suicide attacks upon the United States in New York City and the Washington, D.C., area on September 11, 2001. In this heinous crime against the humanity 19 terrorists blew themselves up causing a worldwide stir. The theme of the novel being so much pertinent to the lives of the ordinary Americans got a momentous popularity as it was first published. Though tragic in nature, the ending is somewhat satisfying and realistic as observed by Lucy, a reviewer:

The end was appropriately tragic. I read a few reviews that described this as an example of magical realism which surprised me. Maybe all the lack of fear, suspended time and happy hostage household was part of it. The ending, while sad and tragic, satisfied my need for logic and realism. This event seemed to have a larger psychological effect on the survivors then
the original hostage takeover. Whether or not that is realistic or not, I have no idea. (Goodreads)

Works Cited


