
Telling Depiction of a Hostage Crisis in Ann Patchett's Work

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Abstract

In this paper, I have tried to discuss how vividly and realistically Ann Patchett has accentuated the predicament of a group of people who are taken hostage by a band of terrorists. It represents some kind of last-minute view on western imperialism as an intact, invincible force, if not of nature, then certainly of culture. 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. 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.

Keywords: Hostage Crisis, Political Protest, Political Underpinnings, Underage Guerillas

Introduction

This contemporary and thrilling 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. Superficially, 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.

Discussion

Most scenes in the book take place in the Vice President, Iglesia's big house that has two floors. On the first floor is the living room, which is a large space where the hostages gather for the party. 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. The cut of lights 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... (Openlettersmonthly)

As the lights are on again, there pour in so many men from all directions loaded with heavy ammunition. Heavy boots and gun butts 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 as 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... (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 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 terrorist missing two fingers further intensifies the apprehension of the hostages 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).

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. Nevertheless, 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).

The brutality starts when General Alfredo hits Ruben Iglesias with a gun. 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 and 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.

The over suffusing calmness and no response from the hostages regarding President Masuda enrage General Benjamin, the head of the terrorists. 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. Nevertheless, 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. 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. 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.

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. 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)

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)

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 terrorists' 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 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. Then, though very slowly, the details began to fall

away. 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 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 novelist has evidently described the plight of these underage guerillas:

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. 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)

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. They use all tactics to make her sing. However, General Benjamin, despite his occasional participation in the delusions at hand, knows whatever they get from Roxane is something to be grateful for.

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. 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.

It can be stressed 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. 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?... (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 challenges in tackling with the agents of terror. Though tragic in nature, the ending is somewhat satisfying and realistic.

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