



RESEARCH ARTICLE

REBUTTING THE ENCROACHMENT OF THE SACRED: A COMMUNITY-CENTERED ANALYSIS OF ADVERSITY IN *SONG OF THE LION*

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 24th June, 2026

Received in revised form

26th July, 2026

Accepted 20th August, 2026

Published online 30th September, 2026

Keywords:

Navajo Nation, community, adversity, resilience, relationship

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ABSTRACT

This research offers a behavioral reading of Anne Hillerman's *Song of the lion* (2017) by framing the Hopi and Diné communities' responses to an act of ecoterrorism through Murray Bowen's family systems theory. The bombing at Shiprock High School, initially perceived as an environmental protest, is revealed as a calculated strategy to inflame intertribal tensions and disrupt economic negotiations tied to Grand Canyon development. Rather than treating adversity as a simple external threat, the analysis positions it as a compound force that tests the emotional and relational cohesion of the Navajo Nation, the novel's core community. While instigating an atmosphere of enmity and separation of the initially close-knit groups, the adversity does not infer the final stage of their risen conflict within the community. It rather unveils the family and community ties that maintain the unity of the group members ready to confront the forces jeopardizing the harmony and their relationship. By applying Bowen's family systems theory to contemporary Native American crime fiction, this study bridges behavioral psychology and literary analysis to illuminate how Hillerman's narrative models intertribal solidarity under duress. The article proceeds along three interrelated lines of inquiry including defining adversity and its literary function in the novel, Analyzing Navajo (Diné) and Hopi behavioral responses and Consolidation of community ties and resilience.

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Citation: Ebony K. Agboh. 2026. "Rebutting the Encroachment of the Sacred: A Community-centered Analysis of Adversity in *Song of the lion*". *International Journal of Current Research*, 18, (09), 38345-38349.

INTRODUCTION

The American history is filled with many stages of adversities confronted by Native Americans. As the most ancient community of the country, the Native Americans lived and became well known for their culture and tradition that were peace-based before the arrival of the European immigrants. They had a cultural belief that consisted in grounding their mundane life in the "Hozho, known as "beauty," actually a richer concept that implies all aspects of living in proper connection with all around" (Milford B. Muskett 2003, p. 5). After encountering the Europeans, Hozho became threatened and the community began to suffer a number of collisions with these flowless comers who lived for imperialist policies of domination, expropriations, removal, and moreover the violation of the sacred natural spaces. Anne Hillerman's *Song of the lion* (2017) among other compelling narratives about the Navajo Nation's steadiness in front of all kinds of maneuvers to devoid the sacred meaning and separate them from their sacred beliefs, delves into the complexities of community dynamics, cultural identity, and the resilience of Natives challenged by these hardships. In one of their studies "Native American Narratives as Ecoethical Discourse in Land-Use Consultations", Joy H. Greenberg and Gregory Greenberg (2013, p. 30), rise to support any individual or collective

actions aiming to preserve peace and harmony within the Natives' community. They emphasize that "Native American sacred sites are being increasingly threatened with appropriation, exploitation, and destruction by non-native agents, both governmental and private who do not, in general, value the sacred sites with the traditional cultures". Set against the backdrop of the Navajo Nation, Hillerman's novel *Song of the lion* raises both the individual's and the community's responsibilities to stop desacralizing the sacred spaces. The aim of this essay is to show how Hillerman slays the violation of the Navajo sites, as it separates initially close-knit groups, to preserve the union among the tribes. In light of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952/1958) anthropological works on the theory of structural-functionalism, and the psychiatrist Murray Bowen (1976) family systems' theory this article informs the systemic relationships within family entities explored as a system by pointing out the interdependency of its various parts. It is conveyed throughout this study that a problem affecting one member affects the others. Basically, this study explores both the Hopi and the Dine tribes as one family as they belong to the Navajo Nation whose ties strengthen the rebuttal as of one group members. The paper is structured around three parts covering adversity and its literary meaning, the analysis of the

Hopi and the Dine tribes' reactions, and the strengthening of community ties and their resilience against adversity.

Adversity and Literariness: Basically, adversity is defined as any challenge, misfortune or counter-force that foils success or advancement. In the real life, the phenomenon is embodied in the human condition as a steady confrontation. Whether at the individual or collective levels, adversity emerges to disrupt peace and stability, raise the issue of adaptability and growth on a mental and psychological level. Caplan (1964) says "the struggle to cope with an adverse event can lead to increased coping skills, an enhanced sense of self-efficacy, increased ability to prevent and cope with future stressors" (quoted in Curtis McMillen 1999, p. 459). Caplan's vision well informs about the psychological and social character that is formed afterwards; yet it does not deviate from the literary understanding of the concept of adversity. Taking it on the field of literature, adversity implies the conflict that fills the plot from early events to the denouement whereby the end of the narrative flattens the hardships and difficulties that have permeated the plot line. Often, the protagonist and the adjuvants stand opposed to the conflict and combine witted and common-sensed strategies to avoid being superseded. In fact, this study merges all social, psychological and literary meanings of the concept adversity to explain the challenges of the Navajos depicted in *Song of the lion*. Clearly, the narrative strived to materialize the victory of Native American Navajo characters over things that could menace their peace.

Car bombing as the outbreak of social tensions in *Song of the lion*: The concept of social tension refers to the discomfort, or conflict that arise in the relationships between individuals or groups within a society. It generally take root in a feeling of injustice, exclusion, competition, lack of recognition, or disagreement about norms and values. The tensions in *Song of the lion* visibly outbreak following a car bombing in front of the Shiprock High School gym. It sets a criminal background in the town creating the link between the incident and a project about "a new proposal for a resort on Navajo land near the Grand Canyon" (p. 35). The bombing confuses the environment of the people as they seek the cause of the mess. Many suspicions arise generating a deleterious atmosphere which tears apart the social fabric. After the explosion, the Navajo police officer Bernie, the first and only witness in the surroundings of the blast started, like any good officer, to create connections with the bomber. The narrator says "car bombs are a terrorist weapon, designed to spread panic" (p. 33). In reality the bombing infers an important message to the people at large in the Navajo Nation. The attention of the people is being required by the people who have not yet revealed their plan. The panic, the feeling of loss and the trauma entrenched by unknown people favors distrust, suspicion in the community composed of "veteran players from the school's past state championship teams [who] had family, friends, and old funs in the area [...] moms, dads, cousins and grannies" (p. 4). The crowd at the gym that symbolically represent the different tribes of the Navajo society, begins to worry about their security. Don't they say that sports bring people together? But this case serves as the point of attack against the peace and harmony of the people. Arguably, the car bombing is a big signal sent to the whole people of the Navajo Nation that has become trapped in a total panic. The goal of such a situation prepares the spirit of the people for other influencing strategies aiming to set way for the implementation of an economic agenda.

Adversity Concealed under Developers' Agenda: The peace of the society is threatened by the car-bombing and all the people at Shiprock and its surrounding are in alert because "whoever did this, didn't make a clear statement" (p. 33). Indeed, the explosion infers some hidden plans. The "developers" are subtly announcing their agenda. According to Alfred Adler in *Menschenkenntnis*¹ (1927) relating to teleology, human behavior is not only determined by the past, but above all by a "purpose". This explains the human goal-oriented behavior where anything somebody does aims to achieve a goal. The developers' plan consists in building a resort in the Grand Canyon. Palmer, the lawyer, whose BMW is blown up believes the this has to do with the business (p. 33). It is clear that his statement announces the maneuvers of the developers against himself as the lawyer who is going to sit as the mediator of a case. When Largo informs Chee the police officer that:

"there's a big meeting about a new proposal for a resort on Navajo land near the Grand Canyon. Our tribal officials, bigwigs from the Hopi, the Havasupai, Hualapai, environmentalists, developers, federal government agency types, Arizona state officials, academics, bureaucrats, you name it. Maybe even some Paiutes. They'll all be there, and Palmer is the ringmaster" (p.36).

The foregoing signals the plans of the developers to influencing all the procedure of the case opposing them to the Natives. The developers have one single objective of securing their economic and financial benefits from this project; and to do so, they have no way other than concealing their real intentions behind the car bombing. In fact, another corollary almost imperceptible but key to the present research is their ignorance about the sacred that their development plan is going to destroy in the Grand Canyon. It is an environmental site kept since times immemorial and which bears generational cultural artefact. Now both parties have to delineate their lines of action. The first line of action is the law enforcement and the second line is the law transgression. In such a context, the good question remains to know who enforces the law and who transgresses. As long as the modern political law is concerned, the analysis condemns the Navajo people. Yet, on their side, they do not consider these modern laws unbeatable before the traditional and sacred laws. Thus, this raises the issue of the everlasting conflict between traditional and modernity.

The Navajos' Response to Modernity

Psychological Duress and the Necessity of "Triangulation": Two sides are emerging from the car explosion: firstly, it is the party that seeks to intimidate and have the advantage of the events and secondly, the other party that has no other choice than defending itself against the growing intimidation. In Murray Bowen's family system thinking, the concept of intimidation is not clearly stated; however, he analyzed power dynamics not as fixed hierarchies but as emotionally regulated relational processes shaped by anxiety, differentiation, and triangulation. As far as triangulation, the most relevant item to this article, is concerned, Bowen admits that it "is an emotional structure of three people, which is also the smallest stable relationship system in the family" (quoted in Bridge, p. 66). This means that whenever tension rise high, to stabilize the

¹ Première traduction anglaise : Adler, Alfred. *Understanding Human Nature*. Traduit par Walter Béran Wolfe, Greenberg, 1927.

relationships involves a third person. In light of Bowen, the care explosion, first weakens the Navajo people to force them to enter the arena of the justice and second, prepare them to review their argumentative strategy to withhold the power pressure of the lobbies. From that point, it is arguable that the other party involved in the conflict begins to intimidate them presupposing they are powerless. Most of the time, coercive actions tend to weaken mental barriers, eliminate obstacles and give way to awful actions. Thus, the rise of the people of Navajo Nation to resist the lobbies intimidation. The conflict opposes the modern and the traditional views of the world; a case that is hardly valuable before the modern jurisdiction as it convokes both cultural realities in terms of old as tradition and new as modernity at the barre. Yet, the most enthralling thing is that each part has their own supporters. Robert affirms the readiness of each camp to influence the events, precisely the developers of whom he says that: "some of those white guy protests groups plan to raise hell. [...] They're just interested in their cause, not the canyon itself" (p. 200).

The triangulation Bowenian principle applies to the lawyer as the third character who is given the responsibility of listening to both parties. Initially, the car which blazed belongs to the great lawyer Aza Palmer, the ringmaster in charge of the mediation (p. 35). By putting him in a hunted position, arguably intend to weaken him as he is acclaimed to be a very good lawyer of the town because he must have good insurance (p.33) and he could be well informed about the problem of the community. He explains to Bernie his mission as mediator in these terms:

ok, here's Grand Canyon Mediation 101. So, the first thing to know is the background of the dispute, and to talk about that, we have to talk a little about the canyon's history. A traditional storyteller would have started with the forces that created the ancient Vishnu Schist and Zoroaster Granite. (p. 204)

The great lawyer Aza Palmer in his role of mediator represents the most important figure to protect and to ensure the good mediation process as his mission consists in listening to all the constituencies that are supposed to sit at the table of discussions. These characterization of these constituencies tell the reader that the parties involved in the case have very specific agendas and cannot let anything hinder their approach to achieve their goal. In this context, the mediator represents the key element of the mechanism, the chair, whose integrity must be preserved from external influences. Palmer on his part would really "plan to open with a little talk about trust and the value of cooperation. Yet, he believes that "having a cop standing behind [him] contradicts that. It says either that [he] is afraid of something or that you guys, the police, are worried about [him]. Either way, it's the wrong message" (p. 116). Obviously, the write endeavors to show the complexity of the issue confronting the Navajo Nation at large and prove that the Navajo have to fight for and defend their tradition and their sacred environment in a triangulated context.

Tradition of the Sacred as the Cultural Anchor of the Navajo Nation: In the framework of this study, the working definition to cultural anchor is the foundation and the steady platform upon which a community builds their core beliefs and practices. This idea of a cultural anchor is to be understood as the undying belief in the community sacred artefacts that permits to avoid the loss of generational cultural heritage. Lynette Marie Pollari criticizes the loss of cultural heritage as

it is "a frightening thing, especially when it appears that young Navajo many times don't understand what they are indeed missing instead of being grounded in their cultural landscape" (p. 29). The sacred is not reduced to an abstract belief; it constitutes an embodied system of knowledge, transmitted across generations to guarantee the continuation of the people's cultural memory despite modernity pressures. In fact, when the Paiute grandmother takes the floor before the visitors including Palmer during their investigation on the field, she speaks on behalf of the spirits in the following tone "it is wrong to disturb the spirits. ... the ancestors deserve a happy rest. That way they can send prayers to keep the world safe." (p. 234). Her words connect the past to the present and the visible to the invisible. Both realities safeguard the harmony, i.e., the *hózhó* of the peoples. In this sense, the Navajo tradition is meant for perpetuation not by "reports and computer" because this reminds that there is more to being human than making money (p. 235). In other words, the sacred functions as a living memory and a shield against cultural bias which echoes epistemic logic grounded in many African traditions. Many peoples need a cultural anchor to resist the winds of destruction of their tradition. But this is not usually obvious to attain when especially speaking in unison misses.

Navajo Nation's Unitary Dynamics: Rebutting the Encroachment of the Sacred: This section probes unitary dynamics alongside the Navajo people's reaction as a system that consists of analyzing how a set of elements are interconnected and evolve together in a coherent manner, without loss of information or dissipation of energy. Undoubtedly, the Navajo people is a profoundly animistic and pantheistic community entrenched into the belief in the natural world spirit. According to Radcliffe-Brown's principle of interdependence and social life is to be understood as a network of mutually related institutions whose stability depends on their functional connections (quoted in Diesing, p. 238). The relationships existing among the elements of the group constitute the functional connections that cannot but hold the stability of the community. Clearly, the strategy that Hillerman puts in place consists in inviting all the different tribal groups to the tribunal to follow the session of the judgement in order to make all the entities function at the same time. How do they organize as one entity to reveal their unity and to operationalize as a system? When ancestral structures face the pressures of modernity, and when the "landmarks of tradition", those moral and spiritual beacons that define traditional representatives, particularly the Navajo in this study, see their identity fade under the influence of various interests leaving many some group-members in an ethical void. This loss of roots exposes individuals to fallacious behaviors toward material gain decaying the strata of the society and fragmenting the social and spiritual harmony.

Yet, the case in point shows the attitude of a close knit-group, all Indians, well-structured to overcome the adversity and the challenge of developers' desacralization of their environment. The writer portrays their protest signs as "they assembled by the main entrance and piled their professional-looking signs on the side-walk near the front doors: save the Confluence, Love the Grand Canyon, Ban the Resort, and Developers = Exploiter" (p.101). Besides, it is worth noting the sign of responsibility and integrity of Palmer when Anderson and Chee discussed about the venue of the meeting which supposedly should be in Phoenix. Chee replied: The Navajo Nation thought you guys needed a read trip.

The site for the potential resort is only half an hour from here, and Palmer plans a field trip at some point.” (p. 103). These exchanges conject the writer’s strategy to highlight Palmer’s responsibility in listening everybody without taking any position. Palmer represents the unique character with K. M. Avono’s (2024) “multiple conscience” perspective which embodies the cultural struggle in point. As a native, his confession when he became the mediator, illustrates the fact that he didn’t know if being Navajo might work in his favor or against him (p. 45). Robert says for example: “some of those groups have a lot of money at stake in keeping things the same. They look like good guys, speaking up for nature and all, but they aren’t as bighearted as the want people to believe (p. 200). The attempts to influence the courses of the events fail leaving the only field visit of the canyon as the ultimate scene to prove to all the parties that the sacred has not got to be destroyed before organizing the development of the Nation. Inside the Canyon where many lives became exposed the author created the ultimate feelings, contentment and emotions mixed up with belief, fear to convince all. The people who buy the project and those who do not have to make up their own decision because “the goal of the mediation was to help the Navajo Nation gather insights its leaders could use in making such an important decision” (p. 338). It is Palmer himself who witnesses that the field trip served its purpose. He insinuates that all the delegates discovered the beauty of the canyon despite the presence of the fog at that moment of the visit. As if the canyon’s beauty has something to do with children’s favorite foods the author constructs the following metaphor from the mouth of a little boy to reinforce the goal “it looked like whipped cream on a giant cup of chocolate” (p.337).

The most important question that arises after such an expressive beautiful image of the canyon is the one to know if the delegates would accept the removal of such a beautiful place in their natural landscape? The answer to this question rests on the reaction of the rest of the delegate who visibly show astonishment and contemplation. In a sudden move, the Hopi, the Hualapai and the Havasupai delegates agreed to “toss in a few tales after lunch or on the bus back to Tuba” (p. 337) which is a very good approach to unity for the survival of the sacred place. In addition, Bernie’s encounter with the sacred lion *Nashdoitshoh* they have known since their childhood through songs their mother and grandmother had sang to them, raises the fear and respect to the sacred that many delegates in the meeting including the leaders and all the elder are aware of. In fact, not only the Canyon deserves protection and attention, it also represent the dwelling place of the sacred lion *Nashdoitshoh*, whose presence arguably signifies the harmony and the peace in the Nation. So, if destroyed, this loss would infer the encroachment of the honored lion whose long existence is believed to bear courage and protection transmitted to generations through the song referring to the beauty that surrounded them. (p.352). The happiness of the Navajo Nation resides in the beliefs they have in their tradition. Their tranquility and peace holds onto their level of responsibility in protecting their great sites that are really loaded with stories and realities of their tradition. The battle between the Navajo primitive life and some groups ambitious initiatives to develop their places, should not go biasing the roots of the communities. Not only dominant assumptions have the legitimacy of knowledge; there are also alternative ways of knowing things.

CONCLUSION

All in all, this research has probes adversity against the Navajo Nation in Anne Hillerman’s *Song of the lion*, a narrative that both documents and resists the desecralizing pressures imposed on Navajo sacred spaces, showing how those pressures ripple through individual lives and communal structures. Reading the novel through Radcliffe-Brown’s structural-functionalism and Bowen’s family-systems theory has revealed that violations of land and ritual has revealed not only discrete losses but systemic disturbances, harm to place destabilization, identity loss, and social cohesion breaks, producing conflicts that must be resolved collectively. By examining the Nation’s composition as interdependent members of a broader Navajo family beginning from the chaos that arose during the car bombing, this study has demonstrated how cultural memory, ritual practice, and collective responsibility operate as mechanisms of repair and resilience. Ultimately, Hillerman’s novel affirms that protecting sacred sites is inseparable from preserving social bonds and cultural continuity in such ways that defend land and rituals that restore and strengthen the community. The present analysis has contributed to interdisciplinary conversations in literary studies, anthropology, and ecoethics by showing how fiction can illuminate the systemic consequences of cultural dispossession and point toward communal strategies for resistance and renewal.

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