

Literary Portraits of Burnout in Contemporary Women's Fiction

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The World Health Organization classifies burnout as an ‘occupational phenomenon [...] resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed’. The primary symptoms include feelings of ‘energy depletion or exhaustion’, ‘mental distance from one’s job’, and ‘reduced professional efficacy’ ([‘Burn-out’, ICD-11](#) 2019). The German-born American psychologist [Herbert Freudenberger](#) is usually attributed with coining the term burnout in 1974, in reference to caring professionals, and it continues to be defined as a workplace condition. However, burnout has been subject to much broader cultural conceptualisation. According to a survey of public perceptions conducted by [Mental Health UK](#) in 2021, several factors (including money worries, isolation, physical health, relationships and caring responsibilities) may interact with the pressures of work, thereby contributing to burnout.

The popular use of the concept resonates well beyond a professional context, as a marker of its powerful influence on our collective imagination. Anne Helen Petersen’s [Buzzfeed article](#) ‘How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation’ (2019) applies medical metaphors to an identifiable set of social and economic circumstances, including economic recession, austerity measures and escalating house prices, thereby diagnosing a generation affected by exhaustion and burnout. This is ‘not a passing ailment’, argues Petersen, ‘but a chronic disease’. Journalistic and self-help interpretations of burnout go well beyond the medical definition of a workplace condition, providing an expanded and often loosely-defined interpretation of the concept. For these reasons, it has been framed unsympathetically by some commentators as a ‘[fashionable diagnosis](#)’ (Kaschka et al. 2011).

The term ‘burnout’ therefore needs to be approached critically. To some extent, it succinctly conveys elements of lived experience and a recognisable set of symptoms. However, the term may also be used to mask social and gendered inequalities, reinforce expectations of self-sacrifice, and place responsibility on the individual rather than wider social structures. Far from being stigmatised, burnout is often interpreted as a desirable quality that reflects an abundance of hard work, conscientiousness and dedication (Schaffner 2016, 95), an observation that goes some way to explaining the ongoing prevalence of the term in the media. Seeking to navigate between these diverse definitions of the concept, this

short article will analyse a recent female-authored Spanish novel as a literary expression of workplace and financial ‘burnout’ from a gendered perspective, along with two other examples in contemporary women’s fiction. Literary fiction provides a rich and varied resource for understanding how this condition is conceived by the popular imagination.



[Elvira Navarro](#)

Elvira Navarro’s novel *A Working Woman* was originally published in Spanish as *La trabajadora* in 2014, and depicts the protagonist Elisa Núñez’s experience of mental illness. The English translation by Christina MacSweeney appeared in 2017. Carefully narrating her psychiatric treatment for anxiety and insomnia, the novel establishes a strong connection between Elisa’s symptoms, financial insecurity, work overload and her frustrated attempts to write. I interpret the novel as a striking example of literary portraits of burnout in contemporary women’s fiction, in which the focus on individual ill-health functions as a commentary on a wider set of social, political and economic circumstances. In this case, the legacy of the 2008 global financial crisis and its impact in Spain provides a crucial point of reference. Elisa’s predicament is drawn out against the backdrop of her observation of deprived areas of Madrid, thereby connecting the protagonist with the ‘pathological’ conditions associated with financial instability, as the author explained in an [interview](#). Just as significantly, the novel represents burnout from the perspective of both gender and social class, highlighting the plight of a middle-class woman in her forties in contemporary Madrid.

Navarro’s *A Working Woman* vividly evokes the predicament of her protagonist in this urban setting. As Elisa navigates the financial squeeze of precarious contracts as a proof-reader for a publishing house, she is forced to share her Public Housing apartment in the district of Aluche with a tenant called Susana, a character who functions as a disturbing alter-ego. Faced with ongoing job insecurity, Elisa begins to suffer from panic attacks: ‘Pocos días después, en la calle, tuve una suerte de pálpito, un presentimiento desbocado, un desbarajuste absoluto de mi sistema nervioso. [...] Notaba los latidos del corazón en mis orejas. Tuve

también un pensamiento: alguien, o algo, me advertía' (2014, 83-84) ['A few days later, when I was on the street, I experienced a sudden sense of foreboding, a runaway premonition, an absolute chaos of my nervous system. [...] I noted the throb of my pulse in my ears. And this thought also occurred to me: someone, or something, is sending me a warning' (2017, 95-96)]. This passage emphasises both her physical sensations and self-doubt about the validity of her perceptions, as the experience of anxiety shapes her external reality. Unable to negotiate a fair deal with her employer, the protagonist's workload increases without proportionate financial reward, and to meet short deadlines she regularly works until midnight. The protagonist's psychological symptoms are described in relatively generalised terms and are connected most directly in the novel to the effects of workplace stress, a situation echoed by her boss Carmentxu, who resigns after becoming unwell from overworking (or overloading).



Workplace burnout

The short final section of the narrative presents an ambiguous recovery, moving to a later point in time as the protagonist speaks to the psychiatrist about her progress. She has been paid and has moved into her partner's apartment in the city centre. In a final self-referential twist, Elisa's search for resolution focuses on writing a novel about her experience narrated in the preceding chapters, as part of a therapeutic process. She claims in the concluding chapter that 'tengo menos encargos y he estado escribiendo la novela. Eso me ha llevado a otro sitio. A otro lugar mental' (154) ['I'm accepting fewer commissions, and I've had time to write the novel. It's taken me to another place. Another mental space' (188)]. Navarro thereby engages with the idea of creative writing as therapy, the theory that expressive writing can increase resilience and decrease perceived stress among individuals who have experienced negative or traumatic events. As a [recent study](#) (DiMenichi et al. 2019) demonstrated, choosing to write about past negative experiences holds potential to achieve

positive outcomes because it may activate changes in the ways in which the brain processes information.

The literary portrait of burnout as representative of the plight of identifiable social groups beyond individual experience is echoed by a recent example of contemporary British women's fiction. Based on the author's professional experience, Emma Glass' novel *Rest and Be Thankful* (2020) tells the story of Laura, a paediatric intensive-care nurse who works a series of nightshifts. Increasingly exhausted by sleeplessness and the demands of caregiving, Laura observes that succumbing to fatigue must again be postponed: 'Tiredness falls off like shrivelled snakeskin, it will hang over the doorway and wait for me until the end of the day' (24). The novel evokes the physical and psychological effects of burnout on medical staff, in this case a female paediatric nurse. Like Elisa, she perceives warning signs of an impending threat which for Laura takes the form of a dark figure at the edge of her conscious vision. Although the immediate causes of burnout are evoked in different professional contexts by Glass and Navarro, in each case the exposition of the physical symptoms of stress centre on the female protagonist, whose coping mechanisms are gradually worn down by the demands of work, financial insecurity and personal relationships.

If we consider broader cultural definitions of burnout, which include parental experiences of caregiving beyond strictly occupational categories, we could make a case for interpreting a passage from Sarah Moss' *Summerwater* (2020) in this context. The novel moves between viewpoints of several individuals in different families staying in near a lake in Scotland. Claire, a mother of young children, perceives that the family's two-week holiday does not represent a break from the relentless demands at home, such as going to 'the swimming pool, which is hellish while you're doing it but worth it afterwards when the kids are exhausted...' (104). Free indirect speech conveys the endless list of tasks at the swimming pool, evoking a sense of weariness in response to the limits on family resources. The novel follows the viewpoint of characters of different age groups. The teenager, Alex, for example ponders on his future whilst kayaking on the lake: 'University, only he's no idea what he'd do there, he's OK at Maths but what do you do with a Maths degree? Then fifty years of work. You shouldn't be thinking about retirement before you've even started' (86). Alex's thoughts about higher education are interspersed with brief reflections on the future of the planet, reflecting the collective predicament faced by Generation Z. Here we move into the realm of existential anxiety, by contrast with medical definitions of burnout.

My focus on the literary examples above does not intend to ignore other social demographics and individuals who experience the symptoms of stress and overload, but

rather to explore literary representations of this condition in the context of dominant models of psychological resilience. Gill and Orgad critique these expectations, arguing in '[The Amazing Bounce-Backable Woman](#)' that 'middle-class women are addressed as ideal subjects of resilience, who possess the substance that helps them to defy the obstacles set by adversity and precarity' (2018, 480). In their book *Burnout: The Secret to Solving the Stress Cycle*, Amelia and Emily Nagoski likewise emphasise gendered patterns of social demands, offering a range of techniques that promise an elusive remedy. The authors include caregiving in both a professional context and new research on 'parental burnout' (2019, xiv). Whilst self-care and the pursuit of wellbeing are usually framed as positive goals, feminist scholarship reminds us that ideological models of resilience place unequal responsibility for caring and social health on groups defined according to gender, age and financial status, among other factors. The 'double shift' and the 'mental load' ([Emma](#) 2018) have become resonant phrases for expressing the gendered divisions of labour in the context of neoliberalism; the invisible work of caring is likewise the subject of Wassenaar's *Motherload* (2022). As Wajcman (2014) has demonstrated, we are not all equally 'pressed for time'.

In the fictional examples above, the characters experience a range of factors including daily pressures, work overload, and uncertainty about the future. This short article has sought to interpret Navarro's *A Working Woman* as a literary portrait of burnout in contemporary women's fiction, by reading the protagonist's experience in the context of the novel's wider social commentary. The term burnout often functions as an imprecise shorthand for a range of diagnosable conditions, such as stress and anxiety, but also as a marker of external pressures on individuals. For all these reasons, it continues to exert powerful resonance both in our collective imagination and contemporary literature.

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