

Narrating Burnout in Miniature: Neoliberal Fatigue and Emotional Exhaustion in Contemporary Flash Fiction

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Received: 08-11-2025

Revised: 23-11-2025

Accepted: 13-12-2025

Published: 25-12-2025

ABSTRACT

*In this paper, I consider emotional exhaustion and burnout in the present-day flash fiction, specifically *The Sand and the Sea*, *Unfinished Houses*, and *All Good Things Have to End Sometime* by Michelle Ross, Ani King, and Nicholas LeRouge, respectively. Despite the fact that the phenomenon of burnout is highly researched in psychology, in health-related literature, and in long form literature, its reflection in the short literary forms has not been investigated extensively. The immediacy and intensity of relational exhaustion is expressed through the compression of narrative and the focalization selectivity of flash fiction. The study legitimizes narrative strategies, imagery, character psychology, and structure using a qualitative, text based close reading approach. The discussion is based on the critique of neoliberal subjectivity by Byung Chul Han and the idea of cruel optimism offered by Lauren Berlant to situate burnout as an experience that is relational, affective, and produced structurally in the modern world.*

Keywords: *affective labor; burnout, flash Fiction, neoliberal subjectivity, narrative compression.*

INTRODUCTION

Emotional exhaustion and burnout have become an endemic state in the twenty first century that is made more acute by the neoliberal social and cultural rules that value self-optimization, unremitting productivity, and the continual regulation of affective labor. In these conditions, the people are obliged more to control not only their performance but their emotional reactions, which are not supported by the structure and do not alleviate the community. Although burnout and emotional exhaustion are thoroughly investigated in the workplace research and psychology, as well as in modern novels, they are relatively poorly represented in smaller literary works, e.g. flash fiction. Brevity and structural compression in flash fiction provide a unique literary channel, which the intensity, immediate, and relational aspects of fatigue can be expressed. Its compressed bottle enables the expression of emotional distress as condensed, saturated blocks, the moments of psychological saturation, relational conflict, which reflect the experience of being exhausted. In this paper, the authors discuss burnout in contemporary flash fiction by using the works of Michelle Ross, *The Sand and the Sea*, Ani King, *Unfinished Houses*, and Nicholas LeRouge, *All Good Things Have to End Sometime* (Ross, 2018; King, 2023; LeRouge, 2025).

The research issue that was discussed in the current paper is the absence of continued scholarly interest in the articulation of burnout by flash fiction, especially the multifaceted interaction between personal, relational, and social aspects of its colonized form of narrative. Though emotional labor and exhaustion in long-form fiction have been critically studied in literary scholarship, and their theoretical critiques have been approached, little analysis has been done regarding how miniature narratives perform these forces with formal accuracy. The narrative economy of flash fiction allows emotional exhaustion to be represented in the immediate and intense emotional perspective where burnout manifests itself as repetition, silence and restraint of emotion without engaging in any overt crisis. Through foregrounding this form, the study brings

to the surface how flash fiction makes visible those omnipresent pressures that shape modern life and particularly those that result in intimate and relational situations.

A theoretical framework underlines this research, where the critique of neoliberal subjectivity by Byung-Chul Han and the idea of cruel optimism by Lauren Berlant are merged. Han maintains that neoliberalism is responsible for the creation of individuals, who, on their part, are exhausted and strained in their relationships as they try to be always productive and optimally managing themselves (Han, 2015, p. 45). In the presented framework, burnout is a result of the pressure that has been internalized not as a personal failure, but as a structural one. Berlant is suggesting that the same is true regarding the individuals' connection with the socially-pumped-up goals, identities, or relationships because they will resist however these connections become harmful or depleted (Berlant, 2011, p. 23). These two approaches combined place burnout right in the middle of the systemic pressure and relational affect, thus providing a subtle framework for understanding how flash fiction reflects both above-mentioned points, the macro-level societal constraints and the micro-level emotional endurance, respectively.

Thus, the study revolves around three interrelated questions. The first one is about the types of emotional exhaustion and burnout that have found their way into contemporary flash fiction, the second one concerns the writers' use of narrative techniques like condensed structure, imagery and character perspective to reveal the intensity and immediacy of burnout within miniature narratives, and the third one is related to the fact that these portrayals have so much in common with the present-day literature and what they might indicate about the labor, care and emotional self-management experiences of society at large. Together, these questions investigate the psychological, relational, and cultural dimensions of the phenomenon.

This paper is a demonstration of how modern miniature narratives are used to present burnout as a relational and cultural phenomenon and as a pathology of an individual by looking at the intersection of systemic pressure with affective endurance in the compressed form of flash fiction, as a condition influenced by neoliberal conditions. The research reveals that flash fiction provides emotional impact by its brevity, which accentuates the tension and allows the moment of silence, repetition, and emotional control to have a strong impact on the affects. Through this, the study places flash fiction as an interesting literary prism to comprehend when it comes to the contemporary experiencing of affective labor, how emotional fatigue is experienced, perpetuated, and encoded into narratives in individual and community contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Burnout and emotional exhaustion have become the characteristic features of modern life, taking a leading place in the field of psychological, public health, and cultural studies. Originally presented as an occupational risk to professionals working within care-related and service-based fields, the concept of burnout has been slowly redefined as a more psychosocial phenomenon, which develops because of chronic stress, institutional pressures, and cultural norms towards productivity and emotional control. Although the causes, symptoms, and effects of burnout have been studied in empirical studies extensively, its literary expression, especially in compressed narrative, e.g. flash fiction, is largely underrepresented. The available literature provides good theoretical and empirical backgrounds, but it lacks essential gaps in addressing how miniature literary texts encode, condense, and criticize emotional exhaustion in the modern socio-economic framework.

In the occupational and health psychology, emotional exhaustion is always indicated as the fundamental aspect of burnout. Seidler et al. review the results of epidemiological and longitudinal studies and argue that burnout can be developed under the influence of the negative psychosocial working conditions, such as work overload, emotional labour, lack of autonomy, and ongoing pressure to perform (Seidler et al.,

2012). Their review highlights that burnout is not the outcome of events but of cumulative and normalized stressors that are inherent in daily professional life. In this context, emotional exhaustion conveys a loss of both affective and cognitive resources that can erode the ability of individuals to have meaningful involvement with work as well as relationship with others. Importantly, Seidler et al. put burnout into the frameworks of the system, instead of single-case pathology. They state that modern work systems are becoming more of responsibility being pushed to the individual, and workers now must take care of stress and performance when the structural conditions are not altered (Seidler et al., 2012). This focus on normalization and endurance is directly relevant to the analysis of literature, because it implies that burnout can be manifested more frequently in form of latent, persistent conditions than acute crisis. These kinds of findings are an important empirical context upon which literary texts are discussed, specifically flash fiction, that reveal exhaustion in subtle ways, in silences or in everyday interactions.

The authors of the paper, Seidler et al., critically consider burnout as a phenomenon over and above inadequate individual responses. They point out that modern work systems are gradually shifting the entire responsibility to the individuals, making them the only ones to regulate stress and performance while the conditions remain the same (Seidler et al., 2012). The whole idea of normality and patience has a very close bearing on literary criticism, as it indicates that burnout usually occurs by means of very subtle, continuous states rather than open crises. The studies imply that one has to closely observe augmentation, saturation, and daily life in order to catch the literary texts, apart from the main fiction that deal with the subject of exhaustion through the subtle use of moments, silences, and interactions.

Meanwhile, the scholars have pointed out some significant conceptual critiques regarding the burnout phenomenon itself. Bianchi most doubtfully question the integrity and soundness of the burnout theory, suggesting that the concept is mainly determined by the measurement devices that are used to assess it rather than by independent theoretical advancement (Bianchi et al., 2019). They claim that emotional exhaustion, which is the best studied and confirmed component of burnout, is identical to the depressive symptomology and thus they largely pose the question of the overlap of concepts. Nevertheless, they do not reject the idea that burnout is an invalid concept but rather they call on more precise differences between occupational stress, emotional exhaustion, and clinical depression.

This kind of critique is enlightening especially in the context of literary studies, as it diverts attention from rigid diagnostic categories and it inclines toward live truth-based practice. Bianchi et al. (2019) implicitly confirm cultural and narrative methods of investigating the concept of burnout as an affective condition instead of an established syndrome by emphasizing the conceptual instability of burnout. Literature, in comparison to psychological measurement, can record the ambiguity, contradiction, and emotional nuance, and hence it is a crucial place where the experience of burnout can be examined in terms of how it is experienced, told, and normalized in our daily environment.

This is further developed in public health scholarship where burnout is considered a multidimensional event influenced by organizational and social context. The conceptual approach to burnout in open-access research into the subject of public health views burnout as a reaction to uncontrolled chronic stress with the following symptoms: emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and reduced efficacy ("Burnout as a Multidimensional Phenomenon", 2021). That point of view highlights the relational and institutional aspects of burnout, focusing on the fact that exhaustion is not the result of personal vulnerability but the result of continuous exposure to the demands that are structurally embedded. This kind of research supports the opinion that burnout needs to be interpreted in larger socio-cultural ecologies of expectations of care, emotional availability, and self-regulation.

The combination of these empirical and theoretical studies makes burnout conditions based on endurance, normalization and systemic pressure. Nevertheless, they are mostly focused on professional and organizational settings, which do not provide much understanding of the mechanisms of burnout working in intimate, domestic, and relational contexts. This shortcoming is especially pertinent when one is dealing with literary manifestations, which often portray exhaustion in the form of family relations, emotional legacy, and patient care, but not work-related environments.

The first step to filling this gap in the literary scholarship is the discussion of burnout as a culture and narrative phenomenon. *Literary Portraits of Burnout in Contemporary Fiction* by Katharine Murphy presents a consistent study of the current representation of exhaustion and precarity, as well as affective depletion in contemporary literature. Murphy has to say that the burnout in fiction is not necessarily manifested in a collapse, rather it is often a form of long-term survival whereby characters keep operating even with the deep emotional exhaustion (Murphy, 2020, pp. 4-6). This focus on perseverance is also in line with the larger cultural discourse that esteems resistance and flexibility, even in degrading situations.

Murphy additionally points out that authors sometimes portray burnout through disorganized, repetitive, and dull to the senses literary text forms which reflect the actual suffering of exhaustion (Murphy, 2020, pp. 8-10). So, through fiction, people can identify burnout as a lived experience characterized by the passage of time, the closeness of the relationship, and the pressure of emotional obligation. Murphy's (2020) analysis not only emphasizes the institutionalization of burnout in the everyday but at the same time uncovers the traces where emotional labor is normalized and internalized. On the other hand, the concern is still unaddressed. Burnout has been the spotlighted issue in psychology, public health, and literary studies, only to leave flash fiction unnoticed as adequately representing emotional exhaustion. The prevailing trend in literary criticism is to analyze novels and other lengthy forms that provide readers patiently with character development and wide-ranging contextualization. In contrast, flash fiction runs through extreme brevity, the most efficient narrative and selective detail. It often shows moments full of emotions without giving a background or solving the conflict.

The absence of flash fiction in this respect is amazing especially if one considers that there are strong formal similarities between flash fiction and burnout itself. A person who is emotionally exhausted is in a way the same as the extreme brevity and narrative economy of flash fiction. A miniature narrative can represent extinguishing through its omission, silence, and repetition. The narrative will be capturing burnout as an atmosphere rather than a triggering scene. Still, the current scholarship has not adequately proposed the idea that flash fiction's formal constraints could heighten the representation of emotional labor and fatigue.

This lack is very much conspicuous considering the formal similarities between burnout and flash fiction. Emotional fatigue, compression, time, energy, and feeling are the indicators of the compression of time and narrative economy of flash fiction. Miniature stories can encode exhaustion in terms of omission, silence and repetition, burnout can be framed as an ambient state, but not as a dramatic one. However, recent research has not adequately theorized the way flash fiction formalities contribute to the heightening of emotional work and exhaustion.

Furthermore, literature is inclined to separate burnout in the professional environment and ignores the fact that miniature stories are likely to embed exhaustion within the framework of intergenerational relationships, household work, and care. Flash fiction usually displays through its shortness and silence the emotional and unsaid parts of the relationship into the burnout dimensions that are not clearly captured by the empirical studies. To fill this gap, there is a need to apply an interdisciplinary methodology based on psychological and social health views and a close reading of literature that considers form, affect and a compression of narratives.

Overall, literature makes burnout a multidimensional phenomenon that is based on chronic stress, conceptual vagueness, and cultural normalization. The most consistent feature of it is emotional exhaustion, and the most critical discussions show the weakness of exclusively diagnostic systems. Literary criticism has gone a little beyond these discussions to suggest how, through the depiction of fictional characters, the reader can identify the burnout as an experienced event and also its emotional atmosphere. Nevertheless, insufficient attention to the study of flash fiction is a definite gap in existing studies. A discussion of contemporary miniature fiction as an embodiment of emotional fatigue provides new understanding on both the cultural logic of burnout and the expressive ability of flash fiction and the form can be regarded as a key but under-explored space in expressing the affective stresses of life in the twenty-first century.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In flash fiction, this durability is enacted through loving relationships that sustain characters while also enacting fatigue. In *Unfinished Houses*, the protagonist maintains a stake in precarious and unfinished relationships (King, 2023). This is a source of meaning and continuity, as well as a source of vulnerabilities and exhaustion. Berlant explains that this is a structurally necessary practice. "In the neoliberal present, the subject has limited choices but to persist in those relationships that provide the possibility of belonging or recognition, even and especially when the relationships are damaging or precarious, since there is no other possibility" (Berlant, 2011, p. 23).

Through the juxtaposition of Han and Berlant, burnout is therefore located at the nexus of systemic force and emotional endurance. Han explains the way neoliberalism produces burnout through the internalized value of productivity, while Berlant illustrates the way emotional attachment allows individuals to endure these burning circumstances. Han and Berlant thus provide the means for an examination of burnout that neither pathologizes the issue nor abstracts the issue as a purely systemic problem.

In *The Sand and the Sea*, motherhood is presented as an instance of self-exploitation by Ross's mother (Ross, 2018). Inherently passive and emotionally repressed caregiving indicates the inner need as distinct from enforcement. This is also consistent with Han's reading of neoliberal exhaustion as occurring through constant, sometimes quasi-imperceptible performance because it reinforces Han's contention that exhaustion involves complex patterns and processes that are replicated in flash fiction by its dense patterning of intricate scenarios into discrete events (Han, 2015, p. 45).

Thus, although Han supplies a systemic explanation, a particular affective quality can be filled by cruel optimism, a notion described by Berlant as a phenomenon where subjects often find themselves stuck in their emotions of attachment to objects, relationships, or ideals when these objects, these relationships, these ideals do not actually allow these people to flourish and, in fact, obstruct their flourishing (Berlant, 2011, p. 23). Furthermore, it is through this phenomenon that one can understand why these subjects find themselves in emotional relationships where their endurance often lands their subjects in a state of exhaustion.

In flash fiction, this resilience is made visible by the way these stories portray the loving relationships that sustain the characters while also perpetuating exhaustion. In *Unfinished Houses*, the protagonist is caught up in relationships that are unstable and unfinished. While offering something of meaning and substance, these relationships also offer something of exhaustion. Berlant explains that this is made structural by the context of neoliberalism, where subjects have limited choice but to maintain these tenuous relationships because they offer something of recognition (Berlant, 2011, p. 23).

The dialogue between Han and Berlant places the concept of burnout at the junction of systemic pressure and emotional endurance. Han points out how neoliberalism causes people to get exhausted by making them internalize the idea of being productive all the time, while on the other hand, Berlant's analysis of the role of human relationships shows that emotional bonds are indeed the sources of individuals' sustaining the tiring conditions (Hans, 2015; Berlant, 2011). The two thinkers help to provide a comprehensive interpretation that neither confines the phenomenon of burnout to the limits of individual pathology nor portrays it purely as an abstract structural phenomenon. The individual experiences burnout as a condition, in addition to contributions from society, relationship expectations, and emotions.

The consequences of burnout are more evident in flash fiction by means of its brevity, selective point of focality, and economy of storytelling, which communicate the build-up of burnout within the compact text. Instead of presenting long developmental arcs, flash fiction portrays moments of affective saturation, silence, or rupture, thus enabling readers to notice burnout in every interaction and in the most intimate relationships. Its brevity corresponds to the fragmentation and compression that are hallmarks of neoliberal life, where people constantly adjust to increasing demands with no respite. The examination of the phenomenon through this twofold lens takes the analysis to a whole new level where the contemporary flash fiction is seen as a carrier and at the same time a critic of emotional exhaustion as a quality of both a systemic and relational phenomenon. It reveals the large-scale pressures that come with the adoption of neoliberal standards, while at the same time, it recognizes the small-scale events of emotional endurance, exposure, and persistence. In the end, this method allows for a sophisticated interpretation of burnout not as a unique condition but rather as a widespread cultural experience that is made visible by flash fiction through its intense and emotionally charged narratives.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, there is a qualitative, textually grounded analysis of representations of burnout and emotional exhaustion in flash fiction. By isolating a few examples of flash fiction stories, namely Michelle Ross' *The Sand and the Sea*, Ani King's *Unfinished Houses*, and Nicholas LeRouge's *All Good Things Have to End Sometime*, it is possible to analyze in what ways these small stories dramatize affective suffering under neoliberal mandates (Ross, 2018; King, 2023; LeRouge, 2025). These examples of stories have been chosen due to their applicability to representations of emotional labor, intergenerational suffering, and relationship exhaustion, in addition to their varied storytelling approaches, which foreground the short, punchy form of flash fiction.

The research uses the method of close reading as the main analytical strategy, allowing for an investigation of narrative strategy, imagery, psychological maneuvers, and structural arrangements in close detail. Instances of individual and relational exhaustion are identified for each of the stories, highlighting how the compression of narrative enables an exploration of affect (Han, 2015, p. 45; Berlant, 2011, p. 23). For example, silent motherhood described in Ross's work exemplifies an internalized societal mandate, while the relational strain exemplified in King's work demonstrates cruel optimism in miniature (Ross, 2018; King, 2023). LeRouge's short story exemplifies the abstraction of fatigue and the exhaustion of responsibility in a universal, symbolic space (LeRouge, 2025).

Besides the analysis of themes in flash fiction stories, the study will also consider the formal characteristics of flash fiction that contribute to the intensification of the phenomenon of burnout (Ross, 2018; King, 2023; LeRouge, 2025). The research method is focused on interpretive rigor to link evidence in the text and theoretical discourse without generalizing and going beyond the scope of investigation for the text. By combining an analysis of the text and theory, it is possible to explore in depth the issue of flash fiction that

portrays the pressures of neoliberal labor and the effects of emotional self-regulation (Han, 2015, p. 45; Berlant, 2011, p. 23).

DISCUSSION

The relationship between a person being emotionally drained and a reflection of this state within a relationship is shown through a complex relationship dynamic and a reduction of everyday, domestic, and familial work, specifically focusing on how affective draining happens in everyday, routine life. The relationship dynamic is set within a very common, almost banal, situation where: “On our way home from the beach, my mother parks the car in the gravel parking lot of an ice cream shop” (Ross, 2018). This common situation, while bringing up nothing out of the ordinary, frames the space in which the draining of a relationship happens, indicating that draining is not always a straightforward action, occurrence, or situation, particularly one that is obvious, physical, or explicit, and often happens through everyday actions, activities, and tasks of everyday life. The situation frames a contrast between the almost physical danger to the child and their mother’s lack of concern, specifically through: “My mother doesn’t say she’s sorry I almost drifted out to sea. She doesn’t say she’s sorry she wasn’t watching me” (Ross, 2018). These and similar statements make up a form of parenting or child rearing that is done through absence rather than presence or engagement, indicating a constant, draining experience within this relationship. This kind of experience supports Han’s explanation for how a relationship to a neoliberal subjectivity happens through a relationship to internalized self-exploitation, specifically through a relationship where one is expected to manage, maintain, and control all relational and emotional labor on one’s own, with little to no support, intervention, or acknowledgment (Han, 2015. p. 45). The mother in Ross is a perfect illustration of a person who experiences this kind of relationship or relationship dynamic to a neoliberal subjectivity, specifically through a relationship to internalized self-exploitation, where her work, specifically through labor, is constant and detailed, yet affectively dull, specifically indicated through her concern with minute and unimportant information, specifically through: “Good chocolate chip to ice cream ratio in this,” rather than through anything to do with her relationship with her child (Ross, 2018).

Intergenerational stress and the compression of emotions, as described by Ross, is also evident in the situation where the mother unloads groceries from the grocery cart, “When my mother returns from the grocery store, kids from the neighborhood hover like seagulls as we help her unload the trunk full of heavy bundles, each double-bagged” (Ross, 2018). In the above instance, the hard labor symbolizes the act of engaging with her emotions, while the presence of the neighborhood kids highlights that relational labor is apparent regardless of whether the emotions involved are made apparent. Again, the compactness of the narratives heightens the sense of burnout since the stories are packed full of emotion within extremely brief narratives. This symbolizes Han’s idea of neoliberal burnout, where exhausted performance is constant and imperceptible (Han, 2015). Furthermore, the story portrays the idea that burnout is apparent within daily tasks, and it doesn’t necessarily have to be visible within grand narratives. Rather, it is within these daily, repeated tasks of love that the burnout is made apparent.

While representing systemic forces at play, the narrative also embodies the affective register involved in relational exhaustion through Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism. “The narrative voice thinks critically about reversing roles with one’s mother: ‘I wonder: if I could travel back in time and mother my mother, would everything have turned out different? If someone hugged her and brushed her hair and said to her, ‘I would swim across the ocean for you,’ maybe she wouldn’t say to me now, ‘You’ll never know how much I love you’” (Ross, 2018). Ambivalence in this passage embodies how one may be both strengthened and strained through attachments. While this mother-daughter bond remains as ever a source of affectionate attachment, this bond participates in ongoing patterns of unaddressed relational fatigue and repression (Berlant, 2011, p. 23), as argued by Berlant in relation to cruel optimism. Thus, by allowing meaning

through relational care while representing ongoing relational exhaustion, this narrative embodies how one may be emotionally exhausted through systemic social forces in life.

Ani King's *Unfinished Houses*, in a similar vein, depicts relational and emotional fatigue, but less directly through a metaphorical, architectural approach, and more through the embodied and emotional aspects of the strain. The narrator literally puts it out this way, "I always fall in love with women who have never lived in unfinished houses. Who've never had blankets make a maze of walls that breathe. My architecture is unsteady and haphazard" (King, 2023). This implied unsteadiness in the narrator's relational life is a clear sign of the past being traumatic and incomplete, thus affecting the current situation of love and tiredness. The use of spatial and structural imagery in King's story asserts the suffering of relationships not as an abstract problem, but as a matter of physical space and concrete "rooms" and "walls" of the self. The narrator goes deeper into the body part of the relationships' strain: "I fall in love with women who do not have childhood splinters or carpenter nails still working their way out from under calloused heels. They weren't taught to walk wounded without making too much sound, to clean up blood behind them. I am always cleaning up blood behind me" (King, 2023). The physical aspect of emotional labor is made here clearer; the use of the first-person present continuous, "I am always cleaning up blood behind me", highlights the never-ending quality of relational fatigue, creating a feeling of continuous, bodily-engaged exhaustion. King's metaphor highlights the bodily aspect of burnout and at the same time proves that emotional suffering is both a psychological and a physical experience, which resonates with Han's claim that the internalized performance takes place in and through both the mind and the body (Han, 2015, p. 45).

King's discussion of cruel optimism appears in the narrator's attachments as follows: "One time, I fall in love with a woman who has lived in unfinished houses, who has feet full of nails... She gets drunk one night and says my whole family is full of broken glass and kerosene, but I especially am a house waiting to burn down. For a moment, I expect her to hand me matches" (King, 2023). In this moment, although there appears to be some danger, the drive to have a relation is still apparent and captures the definition by Berlant as attachment to those socially or individually prized relations as sometimes life-giving but also as sometimes harmful (Berlant, 2011, p. 23). King's use of this attachment as part of the narrative demonstrates how the endurance of this attachment as emotional endurance becomes not just an act of survival but also one of vulnerability as it captures affective labor in times of precarity concerning relation and society within King's narrative.

King's miniature storytelling reflects this condensation in affective tension, packing the emotionality into tight, Coplitchesque imagery. Thus, "I am still just two broken front steps, a garden of plastic hammers, nerf darts, bird bones, and cigarette butts. I am a half-built house that is always unlocked and everything has already been stolen" (King, 2023). It is this listing, or perhaps culmination, of specific details past or in progress toward completion that underscores the impermanency or incompleteness, reflecting again the mental condensation expressed in burnout, in which affective or emotional labor is precipitated within short, powerful imagery, rather than in extended time sequences. At this rate, King extends this resonance within relation trauma metaphorically through specific spatial awareness.

All Good Things Must Come to an End Sometime by Nicholas LeRouge offers a different method, using allegory and cultural symbolism to interpret exhaustion as both personal and social. Santa Claus declares, "I'm old, I'm tired. I can't go on for ever" (LeRouge, 2025), making fatigue clear and obvious, objective, and socialized. This is because Santa's work is both performative and deeply symbolic, revealing how socialized cultures demand an endless cycle of happiness, care, and social relationality. This is because when the children respond with, "But you can't stop! No!!" (LeRouge, 2025), it reinforces social and relational demands of exhaustion. Then when Santa says, "Sorry, kids, I'm done. It's incredibly exhausting to be responsible for delivering all your gifts on the one day," it shows how socialized roles construct and

demand affective labor, which, according to Han's analysis of neoliberalism and exhaustion, is indicative of Han's conceptual critique of neoliberal subjects (Han, 2015, p. 45). Berlant's notion is also being illustrated here because the children are emotionally and psychologically attuned and committed to Christmas and its emotional and psychological resonance and comfort, all of which remains when it is at odds with Santa's exhaustion (Berlant, 2011, p. 23).

These texts show the power of emotional labor expressed through flash fiction's brevity, selective focalization, and compressed narrative form. Ross portrays decades of maternal relational fatigue with only a few vignettes; King represents relational and embodied exhaustion in metaphorically dense paragraphs and LeRouge collapses cultural and relational strain into one single episode. The formal compression reflects the psychological and temporal compression that are typical of burnout, and it shows that tiny stories are very much able to convey the intensity, persistence, and cumulative effects of emotional exhaustion. In every case the very focalized and concentrated moments of the narratives are the ones that intensify the reader's feeling of sustained labor, relational pressure, and ongoing fatigue, thus permitting affective experiences to be articulated with the precision and immediacy that longer narratives might diffuse.

To summarize, the texts taken together portray the emotional drain and the burnout as non-recurrent and not purely personal; rather they are born of the system pressure, relationship dynamics, and long-lasting emotional attachments. The critique of Han sheds light on the structural and self-exploiting aspects of fatigue (Han, 2015, p. 45), while the analysis of Berlant shows how the life-sustaining factor of relational endurance at the same time keeps the strain going (Berlant, 2011, p. 23). The flash fiction form has condensed narrative that captures these dynamics in a manner that allows the readers to feel exhaustion in its most immediate, relational, and culturally embedded forms. The contemporary flash fiction, by portraying burnout in its smallest form, reveals the widespread, usually hidden effects of neoliberal labor, relational expectation, and affective self-management in the life of the twenty-first century, thus providing a detailed and multiple perspectives of exhaustion as experienced, relational, and socially mediated.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how modern flash fiction encapsulates emotional depletion and burnout and places the two within the vortex of systemic forces and affective migration. By intensive analysis of *The Sand and the Sea* by Michelle Ross, *Unfinished Houses* by Ani King, and *All Good Things Have to End Sometime* by Nicholas LeRouge, one can see that burnout is not an individual illness, but rather a state of relationships, culture, and structure that is influenced by the market requirements of self-optimization, round-the-clock work, and emotional labor. The concise and compressed narrative structure of flash fiction is singularly well-crafted to explore the intensity, immediacy and relational aspect of fatigue, as the invisible labor was revealed in a few tight and focused episodes.

The description of maternal labor by Ross is the demonstration of emotional tension in daily performances, sea lance, and redundancy, which symbolize the criticism of internalized self-exploitation by Han as a subject of neoliberalism (Han, 2015, p. 45). The metaphorical descriptions of unfinished houses by King reflect relation and corporeal exhaustion, which illustrate the notion of cruel optimism when attachments keep life alive and at the same time, they create vulnerability and corpulence (Berlant, 2011, p. 23). LeRouge goes further to a cultural scale, which symbolizes socially coded work and relational anticipation as reasons of emotional strife. In these writings, the compressed nature of flash fiction makes burnout seem more intense, cumulative, relational, and societal pressures feel very palpable.

By combining the frameworks of Han and Berlant, burnout is revealed as a structurally constructed and an intensely experienced phenomenon. Han explains systemic, neoliberal causes of exhaustion, and Berlant predicts the relational and affective resilience within relationships when they are strained (Han, 2015, p. 45; Berlant, 2011, p. 23). The combination of them enables the multidimensional interpretation of burnout which takes into consideration psychological, relational, and cultural levels. This investigation helps to fill a significant gap in the literary studies, as the studied genre, flash fiction is frequently neglected, despite sharing its formal qualities with the compressed temporality of exhaustion.

Through the examination of the ways in which miniature stories make emotional labor apparent, the paper has shown that flash fiction is an essential tool in comprehending the constraints of the twenty-first century life, which are often very subtle. Finally, these texts unveil that burnout is structural, relational as well as affective, and the brevity of flash fiction enhances its representation, providing a deep understanding of modern conditions of fatigue, stamina, and affective work.

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