

**THE PROJECTION OF THE CLASSICAL NOVEL IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF
ORGANIZATIONAL MOBBING INTO CYNICISM AND BURNOUT: REŞAT NURİ
GÜNTEKİN “ACIMAK (TO FEEL PITY FOR)”**

Suzan URGAN

**¹Assoc. Prof. Dr. 19 Mayıs University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative
Sciences, Department of Insurance and Actuarial Sciences,
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9280-4174**

ABSTRACT

Mobbing, cynicism, and burnout are factors that negatively affect individuals in organizational life and have severe consequences. While they appear to increase with the complexity of work life, their roots date back to ancient times. Solutions to today's complex problems can only be solved through a thorough analysis of the systematic patterns of past events. The purpose of this study is to reveal the relationship between mobbing in organizations and cynicism and burnout. This relationship is examined within the framework of the classic historical novel "Acimak (to feel pity for) " by Reşat Nuri Güntekin. Data obtained through document analysis was interpreted thematically through content analysis. The analysis revealed that mobbing leads to cynicism and burnout. This study highlights the need to examine literary works on the role of mobbing in causing cynicism and burnout. It is crucial to understand the profoundly impacting factors such as mobbing, cynicism, and burnout on organizations through the lens of a novel, and particularly to understand the dynamics that disrupt the balance between an individual's internal and external worlds. It's clear that literary works are a valuable tool for understanding these issues, and that this gap needs to be filled with interdisciplinary studies.

Keywords: Mobbing, Cynicism, Burnout, Reşat Nuri Güntekin, Pity

Introduction

Mobbing, which refers to systematic, deliberate actions aimed at damaging the reputation and honor of employees, alienating them from their jobs, excluding them, and causing them to become bored, produces numerous psychological and physical consequences (Turkish Human Rights and Equality Institution, TİSEK, 2025). A study of 9,000 public employees in the US found that 42% of female employees and 15% of male employees had been subjected to mobbing in the last two years, costing \$180 billion in lost time and productivity. Similarly, a study conducted in Sweden found that 10%-15% of workplace suicides were due to mobbing (Association for the Struggle Against Mobbing, 2023).

One of the psychological and physical consequences of mobbing is cynicism, and the other is burnout. According to Cook and Medley (1954), cynicism refers to chronic hatred and anger (Calamia, 2013: 495). While cynicism is an undesirable state, it can emerge as a defensive response developed by an individual under extreme stress (Anderson, 1996). Burnout, on the other hand, corresponds to a state of exhaustion and weariness synchronized with the disappointment of an individual's hopes in an organizational context (Maslach and Jackson, 1981).

Events that occur within an organization and deeply affect individuals are the subject of literary works. In this context, according to Blotner (1955: 48), literary works are functional tools for analyzing individual and group behavior. Similarly, according to Sorokin (1947), the formal and content harmony of works of art, such as the novel, which are a synthesis of logic and aesthetics, has a mathematical basis (Dağıstan, 2019: 1169). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between mobbing, cynicism, and burnout within a qualitative framework, using Reşat Nuri Güntekin's novel *Acımak*.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework examines the concepts of mobbing, cynicism, and burnout within their organizational contexts.

Mobbing: Konrad Lorenz coined the term mobbing in the 1960s. Lorenz defined mobbing as the harassment of animals among themselves or against strangers from outside the herd. In 1972, Dr. Peter Paul Heinemann defined it as violence inflicted by a group of children in schools against a single child (Gürbüz and Gürdal, 2019: 11; Çobanoğlu, 2005: Davenport et al., 2003). The term mobbing was used in the organizational field by Dr. Heinz Leymann.

Leymann addressed mobbing with concepts such as psychological violence, psychological terror, harm, and harassment (Leymann, 1996: 167).

Mobbing is a type of conflict that arises from the expression of inadequate interaction in the workplace, a form of violence seen in complex societies. In the workplace, moral harassment is associated with concepts such as bullying, institutional harassment, and worker psychoterrorism (Manatos, 2015: 1608). In mobbing, a specific individual is chosen as the target. Prolonged, repeated, and deliberate negative behavior is exhibited towards this person (Leynman, 1996: 168). In this process, there are those who engage in mobbing, the perpetrators, the victims, the victims, and those who witness the process. According to Tinaztepe (2006), the process begins with exposure to intentional and harmful behavior. Perceived psychological violence triggers burnout and decreased performance, characterized by alienation, apathy, boredom, and weariness, and triggers the process of leaving the job (Akar et al., 2011: 180).

Studies have created behaviors and models related to mobbing. One of these models is Leynman's five-stage typology. Five different behaviors are exhibited within this framework. These are: These include attacks on self-presentation and communication, attacks on social relationships, attacks on reputation, attacks on quality of life and professional skills, and attacks on health (Gürbüz and Gürdal, 2019: 18). According to Schaufeli et al. (1996), employees exposed to mobbing tend to exhibit burnout and cynical behaviors (Gül and Ağıröz, 2011: 44).

Studies on mobbing reveal that mobbing is a widespread global problem stemming from an increasingly competitive and stressful corporate life (Akar et al., 2011: 179). However, when literary texts, films, and other historical documents are evaluated, it becomes clear that it exists wherever and whenever humans exist. When these works are examined, it is clear that they cause quite negative outcomes, one of which is cynicism and the other is burnout.

Cynicism: The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term "cynic" as "a person who tends to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions, and is accustomed to expressing this through sarcasm and sarcasm" (Şen and Basım, 2022: 55). Cynicism, on the other hand, was included in Cook and Medley's (1954) study on the hostility scale and refers to chronic hatred and anger (Calamia, 2013: 495). Hostility, a persistent

personality trait, is considered a skeptical, distrustful, and cynical disposition toward others at the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional levels (Everson-Rose et al., 2013: 994).

In cynicism, an important organizational behavioral outcome, individuals only pursue their own interests and are willing to engage in hostility for this purpose (Şen and Basım, 2022: 56). Hostility-based cynicism manifests as distrust and contempt toward the individual, manager, organization, or other employees (Anderson, 1996: 1397). Therefore, according to Dean et al. (1998), organizational cynicism refers to an individual's negative thoughts toward their organization. This situation brings about many problems for employees and organizations. One of the assumptions underlying this negative attitude of an individual is the organization's lack of integrity. This leads to the development of negative attitudes, contempt for the organization, and derogatory actions and critical behaviors (Erdoğan and Bedük, 2013: 20). Similarly, according to Fleming (2005), organizational cynicism emerges as a result of hopes that first increase and then are dashed within a systematic framework, transforming into a personality trait and psychological defense mechanism (Durmuş, 2025: 660).

While cynicism is an undesirable state, it is considered an adaptive response for the individual to achieve balance. It shows similar results to burnout research in the contexts of resignation, hope, defeat, and apathy. Excessive stress, role overload, unmet personal and institutional expectations, inadequate social support, and a lack of competence are among the factors that contribute to this. Beyond this, promotions, goal negotiations, increased organizational complexity, cuts, layoffs, and threats of inability to reinvent oneself are cited as causes of burnout and cynicism. Similarly, burnout and cynicism share a common denominator, as do their consequences. These consequences include low performance, low motivation, interpersonal conflict, absenteeism, and an increasing trend in intentions to leave (Andersson, 1996: 1399).

Burnout: Burnout refers to excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources, failure, weariness, or exhaustion. In an organizational context, it refers to an employee feeling ineffective in achieving their goals (Freudenberger, 1974: 164). In organizations, burnout originates in the work environment. Burnout is the state in which employees experience anger, shame, or hopelessness due to constant psychological, social, and physical pressure in the work environment (Maslach and Jackson, 1981: 99). Cristina Maslach provided the most widely used definition, describing it as a psychological process characterized by emotional exhaustion, desensitization, and a diminished sense of accomplishment resulting from human

interaction (Erdoğan, 2021: 409). In emotional exhaustion, individuals are unable to achieve psychological and emotional balance in their interactions with others. This depersonalization leads to difficulty empathizing. Inadequacy, a feeling of low achievement is perceived (Urgan, 2019: 689; Demerouti, 2024: 494). Initially, scientists believed that burnout stemmed from emotional and interpersonal stressors in the workplace. However, in the 1990s, Maslach et al. (1996) used the depersonalization component synonymously with cynicism, a generally distant attitude toward work (Demerouti, 2024: 494). The primary consequence of burnout related to cynicism is the individual's disappointment. This disappointment leads to the development of a motivation to mistreat those who cause it (Freudenberger, 1974: 164).

According to Leiter and Maslach (2000), work-related stress is the primary cause of organizational burnout. Accordingly, increasing job demands and a lack of resources trigger burnout (Yeşilbaş and Wan, 2017: 1025). Based on this, excessive workload, uncertainty about working hours, low wages, workplace pressures, a negative organizational climate, disruption of the hierarchical order, and loss of motivation lead to stress and burnout (Eriş et al., 2017: 336; Urgan, 2019: 689). There is a relationship between mobbing, which occurs commonly in organizations, and burnout (Blase and Blase, 2003; Grunau, 2007; Yeşilbaş and Wan, 2007; Hoşgör and Gün, 2020).

According to Hannan and Freeman (1984), organizations are living organisms. In these respects, they resemble other living things. Thus, organizations are affected by environmental dynamics to sustain their existence, and the continuation of their activities depends on this perspective (Koçel, 2013: 361). Therefore, expressing the problems faced by individuals within organizational life in only one element would be an incomplete approach. These elements interact with each other, and one can be the antecedent of the other. The same applies to the concepts of mobbing, cynicism, and burnout. While these elements may formally change with the dynamics of the era in which we live, their essence remains unchanged. They are present in all theories concerning organizational behavior, management, and strategy, and even form a common denominator in interdisciplinary concepts. Classical novels, which best express the era in which we live, bear traces of these theories. Furthermore, their impact on humans is strikingly demonstrated. Novels, in particular, play a major role in the study of individual and group behavior. This characteristic dates back to Ancient Greece. Works produced in Socratic schools during and after the time of Socrates are seen to serve as a guide for students as simulations (Dağıstan, 2019: 1169).

Methodology

This research examines the relationship between organizational mobbing and cynicism and burnout. In this context, it is a qualitative study that examines the concepts discussed in classic novels within the framework of a case study. The study was structured using the single-case study design proposed by Yin (1984). Data were obtained through document analysis, and content analysis was applied thematically to the obtained data. The sample was Reşat Nuri Güntekin's novel *Acımak*. The cynicism and burnout experienced by the novel's character, Mürşit Efendi, is considered a "state." The organizational and psychological processes Mürşit Efendi is exposed to are subdivided into themes. These processes are:

Mobbing Process: Systematic patterns of bullying and oppression directed at the character.

Burnout State: Emotional exhaustion, loss of meaning, and a feeling of low self-worth.

Symptoms of Cynicism: This is the character's distrust and loss of value towards his or her environment and systematic relationships.

The subunits mentioned above were evaluated through descriptive and thematic content analysis, based on the narratives within the novel and its relationships with other characters. Using this data, themes and codes were created based on the novel's textual content and event patterns. Exemplary quotes aligning with these codes are provided, and these examples are interpreted.

Findings

This section presents themes, codes, and sample excerpts within the context of mobbing, cynicism, and burnout.

Theme 1. Organizational Mobbing

Codes: Ridicule, exclusion, devaluation, concealment of the truth, assignment of tasks beyond one's capacity, systematic behavior, and targeting the main character.

The concepts expressed in the codes are the main elements that reveal the element of mobbing. In particular, assigning tasks beyond one's capacity, directly centering the individual, and systematic behavior are all causes of mobbing that also have legal consequences. The bullying that the main character, Mürşit Efendi, was subjected to within the organizational process in which he was involved is presented below with sample excerpts

from the novel *Acımak*, originally written by Reşat Nuri Güntekin in 1928 and translated from Ottoman Turkish by M. Fatif Kanter.

"My friends at the department have found me a hardworking kid with no mouth or tongue... They're getting more and more worked up. And it's not just my own superiors who ask for my help; the heads of other departments are also being incredibly annoying. They'll throw another long and tiring task at me, hoping you'll compile a list by going through the records. I'll be overwhelmed for days with dusty notebooks. Or the accounting manager will get the better of me. Another day, the director of education will have a chore." (p. 50)

"Let me explain, kid... You work non-stop. Your other friends have gotten used to laziness, stupidity, and squalor, and they've begun to see nothing extraordinary in it. They see you because you're worse off today than you were the day before." (p. 53)

"When I used the word 'diligence,' your face turned strange. That's the least of the words they use for you. They'll treat you with sincerity because you obey your superiors' orders." They call me "a slacker," "a sycophant," and "a sycophant." There are various accounts of my work... Some attribute it to naivety (foolishness)." (p. 54)

"The roads are full of invisible rocks... One shouldn't hit them... Worse still, there are hidden currents that, when caught in them, one doesn't realize the path has changed, that it's drifting away... Until one sees oneself stranded on other shores..." (p. 55)

"I couldn't keep my eyes off official business. Then came fights, gossip, a thousand trivial matters, and boredom." (p. 56)

"I worked day and night for a month and a half. Those who saw me toiling in the dust at the head of the laborer called me "head farmer." (p. 64)

"You're an honest man, what have you got? As if you'd stolen like everyone else, we'd have a few pennies. We wouldn't have had this kind of trouble. At least you couldn't open your eyes a little longer." Were you? Look, the former treasurer... He became an undersecretary of some kind in Istanbul." (p. 85)

The quotes above demonstrate that the main character is systematically assigned a constant stream of work, especially by the organization's upper management, leaving no time for a social or family life outside of work hours. This work order has become a necessary part of his routine. He is called a series of derogatory nicknames, ridiculed, gossiped about, excluded, and devalued. It appears that he has begun to question himself in these circumstances and struggles to establish a balance between his inner and outer worlds. He

attempts to resist the pressures exerted within his hierarchical work life with his own truths. Consequently, he is subjected to coordinated interventions, including exclusion, humiliation, and discrediting at work, all characteristic of mobbing behavior. As can be seen from his statements, despite his efforts to fight back, he has entered a period of alienation and a tendency toward losing his own values. It is clearly seen that all these elements are compatible with Leymann's five-stage mobbing typology (Gürbüz and Gürdal, 2019; Dinçay, 2020).

Theme 2. Burnout

Codes: Loss of motivation, alienation, withdrawal, dependency.

"In the morning, the director had a quarrel with the Governor Pasha... He came to the office in a rage and hurled various insults at the officers in my staff. Alas, we submitted... Soon, one of the officers misbehaved. I couldn't speak up. In the afternoon, a quarrel with two officers who didn't know their duties and with the landlord who had come to me for the rent, which I was indispensable for because I hadn't received my monthly payment... Here's a glass for each of them..." (p. 48)

"This injustice had a strange effect on me: I was like a man waking from sleep, struggling uselessly in a suffocating nightmare, not remembering that he was struggling." (p. 56)

"I appealed to the province, the municipality, in short, everywhere. No one approved. But things were going very slowly, and the tiny children's coffins continued to pass by my window. My nerves were severely damaged. Every time I saw these bodies, my throat would choke, and I would pound my chest with my fist, *Murderer... Murderer... You're the one killing them... You should have always listened to your conscience!* I would mutter, sometimes even sobbing. (p. 64)

"I realize that despite my spiritual impulses that sometimes make me neglect my greatest interests, my life, I am a weak man. I will never be a good civil servant." (p. 69)

"I no longer interfere with the affairs of others. I don't rebel against the cruelty and injustice done to others, feeling the opposite in my heart. I get along well with the elders. I turn a blind eye to the negligence and mistakes of the younger ones as much as possible. Because I don't interfere in anyone's business and seem to approve of everyone, hardly anyone attacks me. In short, I've become a colorless, soulless man." (p. 70)

"I'm not happy that I've gotten used to rakı (a Turkish alcohol). But in the evenings, a weight involuntarily settles on one's shoulders, and everything darkens. I don't think there's a better cure for this pessimism than rakı. However, there is another remedy, but "I don't even dare to think, let alone write" (p. 71)

"I succumb to open insults. My God, how far I've fallen!... I used to be unable to tolerate others' pity, let alone their insults." (p. 87)

"I am defeated, but I am defeated like a soldier who falls to the ground after fighting the enemy hand-to-hand and firing his last bullet." (p. 57)

Elements such as conflicts with organizational actors, the belief that he has failed in the struggle, the individual's self-alienation, and the questioning of his own values represent processes leading to burnout. The individual's indifference to the injustices inflicted on others, the loss of his own purpose in life, and the tendency towards dependency demonstrate the impact of this syndrome.

Theme 3. Cynicism

Codes: Financial loss, anger, debt, habit of taking bribes.

"I was getting irritated and defiant about the most trivial thing. One day, someone made a joke of me. I politely asked him to leave me alone. He ignored me; in fact, he became even worse. He was as skinny as a leg, a mangy thing anyway. *I don't know about everyone else, but I said, 'I'll grab you by the scrawny neck and throw you out the window.'* And I don't know how, but I insulted him with the worst words that could come out of the mouths of the mob." (p. 57)

"At that time, like a person in a dream, I didn't know what I was thinking or doing. Under these influences, I began to engage in petty corruption, or rather, abuse and theft, while on duty. Once you start down this path, of course, it's gone in a flash... First, I turned a blind eye to some corruption, and with the money it generated, I silenced the most vicious creditors who would stalk me on the street and show up at my doorstep at home, causing a scene. Then I expanded the business. I began stealing ruthlessly. In a short time, I had a considerable amount of money. This I paid off very little of my debt. Because I no longer felt ashamed of the insults of creditors." (p. 95)

"I turned to vagrancy. Sometimes I smuggled tobacco and alcohol. I earned a pittance. For me, there was no such thing as honest or dishonorable, clean or dirty. What can you do? People don't live like angels without eating and drinking." (p. 108)

“When I read about murders in the newspapers, I was astonished. I couldn't imagine how someone could shoot and kill someone from their own home. Listening to Tahsin Efendi, I resolved this spiritual conundrum. If I had seen Nasuhi Bey in front of me at that moment, I would have killed him.” (p. 61)

Based on the quotes above, we can see that Mürşit Efendi fell into despair and drifted away from his ethical values as a result of the injustices he experienced and his dashed dreams. The financial losses he experienced and the normalization of bribery signify moral decline. The line between right and wrong has become blurred. A tendency toward aggression and violence against others is also a clear indicator of cynicism. In fact, it appears that the individual initially struggles with the normlessness they encounter within the organization and in social life, using their own truths. However, they fail and drift away from true ethical norms. All of this has become a destructive system within their inner world. In this context, cynicism is clearly a systematic approach to encountering unethical situations within the organization's values, struggling against them, failing to succeed in this struggle, resorting to psychological and behavioral anger in response to this failure, and alienating the individual from all true values (Anderson, 1996; Dean et al., 1998; Durmuş, 2025).

Conclusion

Historical and literary anecdotes provide a guide to understanding the present. Novels are also a simulation of real life. Themes are expressed through an artistic narrative. Changing conditions of the day do not occur suddenly but emerge as a result of a process. As in many disciplines, this is anticipated in the main theories of organizational behavior. When literary works written years ago are examined, many concepts related to the individual are explored within the working conditions of the relevant period. This study examines the concepts of mobbing, burnout, and cynicism within the framework of Reşat Nuri Güntekin's novel *Acımak*, which covers moments from organizational life nearly a century ago.

The novel's main character, Mürşit Efendi, received a good education during his lifetime and entered the workforce idealistically. His current working life, reflected in professions such as civil servants and district governors, was characterized by career-oriented positions within the context of the time. However, he experienced difficulties coping with the problems of his time. He particularly encountered problems within the organization that impacted his social and economic life. In this context, the mobbing Mürşit Efendi encountered led him to burnout and cynicism. Maslach (2003) defines burnout as a reaction resulting from

chronic work-related stress and interpersonal stress factors. According to Leiter and Maslach (2000), stress manifests itself through psychological distress, namely mobbing (Akar et al., 2011). Furthermore, cynicism also emerges as a result of mobbing and presents symptoms similar to burnout (Anderson, 1996). According to Schaufeli et al. (1996), those exposed to mobbing exhibit symptoms of burnout and cynicism (Gül and Ağıröz, 2011; Anderson, 1996). An evaluation of current studies on the role of mobbing in burnout and cynicism has revealed strong correlations between mobbing and burnout (Albar and Ofluoğlu, 2017; Kehribar et al., 2017; Yıldız, 2020; Ceran and Pınar, 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2024), and between mobbing and cynicism (Pelit and Pelit, 2014; Avcı and Aydoğan, 2022; Ayık, 2022; Zhang et al., 2024).

This study examines the relationship between mobbing, burnout, and cynicism from the perspective of Reşat Nuri Güntekin, one of the most influential writers of his time. As mentioned above, novels convey real emotions in literature. Mürşit Efendi, who successfully graduated from Mülkiye (Istanbul Technical University), was ridiculed for his diligence and exploited his efforts, and his determination to fulfill his duties was constantly hindered. As these pressures gradually increased, his internal and external balance was disrupted. His ability to distinguish right from wrong was stripped away. He tried hard to cope with his problems but was unsuccessful. This process led him to dependency. Similarly, he felt anger toward his organization and society. This anger led him to harm the organization and society and to seek revenge in some way. Therefore, as this example strikingly demonstrates, the true feelings of the individual within the organization are identified with the literature. In this respect, expressing theoretical studies through art will ensure a lasting understanding of the issues. Furthermore, it is important to present the true projections of theoretical issues through a different approach.

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