



HISTORY, MEMORY, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF TRUTH IN ORHAN PAMUK'S NIGHTS OF PLAGUE

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ABSTRACT

*Orhan Pamuk's Nights of Plague (2021; English translation, 2022) presents a fictional account of a plague epidemic on the Ottoman island of Manchuria while simultaneously questioning the ways in which history is recorded and understood. This study examines how the novel problematizes the idea of historical truth by bringing together historical imagination, archival evidence, personal memory, political authority, and nationalism. Particular attention is given to Mina Mingerli, the fictional historian-narrator who reconstructs the history of Manchuria from letters, memoirs, official records, and other sources. Her attempt to piece together the past demonstrates that historical narratives are not simply discovered in documents but are shaped through selection, interpretation, and storytelling. The study also explores how contradictory accounts and personal memories challenge the authority of official historical records. Furthermore, the emergence of Mingherian nationalism illustrates how political communities can reinterpret the past in order to establish a shared national identity. The novel's representation of government control during the plague also reveals the close relationship between political power, information, and the production of historical knowledge. Using a qualitative and interpretive method of textual analysis, this study examines selected narrative elements and themes in *Nights of Plague* in relation to historiography, memory, nationalism, and political authority. The study argues that Pamuk deliberately destabilises the boundary between history and fiction and encourages readers to question the assumption that historical truth is singular, fixed, and completely objective. Ultimately, *Nights of Plague* suggests that history is shaped by the interaction of evidence, memory, interpretation, power, and narrative, while also drawing attention to the voices and experiences that may remain outside established historical accounts.*

KEYWORDS: Orhan Pamuk; *Nights of Plague*; historical fiction; historiography; historical truth; memory; nationalism; political power; archive; narrative.

1. INTRODUCTION

History is generally understood as an account of events that have already taken place. It is often reconstructed through documents, archives, personal testimonies, official records, and memories of the past. Yet the process of writing history is more complicated than simply collecting evidence and presenting facts. Historical events do not speak for themselves. They are selected, interpreted, organised, and narrated by individuals who live in particular social, political, and cultural circumstances. This raises an important question: who writes history, and who has the authority to decide what should be accepted as historical truth?

Orhan Pamuk's *Nights of Plague* (2021), translated into English by Ekin Oklap in 2022, provides a particularly rich literary context for examining these questions. Set during a plague epidemic in 1901 on the fictional Ottoman island of Mingheria, the novel combines elements of historical reality with fictional characters, events, documents, and narratives. Although Mingheria is imaginary, Pamuk places the island within the political and historical environment of the late Ottoman Empire. This combination creates a narrative space in which the boundaries between historical fact and fictional reconstruction remain deliberately uncertain.

The novel is not concerned only with the consequences of a devastating epidemic. It also draws attention to the process through which the past is reconstructed and given meaning. Mina Mingerli, who presents herself as the historian of Mingheria, attempts to piece together the island's history using letters, memoirs, archival materials, official records, and other accounts. Her position is important because she does not simply

tell the story of the past; she also reveals the difficulties involved in finding and interpreting evidence. Through Mina, Pamuk invites readers to think about the extent to which a historian can genuinely recover the past without altering it through interpretation.

One of the most striking features of *Nights of Plague* is its deliberate uncertainty between history and fiction. The novel contains references to real historical figures and political circumstances, while Mingheria itself is a fictional creation. Pamuk further complicates this distinction by presenting fictional documents, letters, memories, and archival sources as materials through which the past can supposedly be reconstructed. The reader is therefore placed in an unusual position: historical information is presented through a fictional narrator who claims the authority of a historian. This narrative strategy encourages readers to question whether any historical account can provide a completely transparent representation of what actually happened.

The problem becomes even more complex when the sources available to Mina contradict one another. Official documents may provide one version of an event, while personal letters or memories may offer another. Such differences demonstrate that evidence does not automatically produce a single interpretation of the past. The historian must decide which sources are reliable, how conflicting accounts should be understood, and how separate pieces of information should be brought together into a coherent narrative. In this sense, the historian becomes an interpreter rather than merely a recorder of events. Pamuk uses this process to draw attention to the role of narrative in the construction of historical knowledge. The



importance of contradictory sources and Mina's interpretive role is also central to the existing discussion of the novel.

The archive occupies an equally important position in the novel. Archives are commonly associated with authority because they appear to preserve evidence of the past. However, documents are created by particular individuals and institutions, and their preservation is never entirely separate from social and political circumstances. Some experiences are recorded, while others may be ignored or forgotten. In *Nights of Plague*, Pamuk challenges the assumption that archival evidence automatically guarantees historical objectivity. Mina's dependence on different types of sources demonstrates that even a careful reconstruction of the past involves choices concerning what should be included, how evidence should be interpreted, and which accounts should receive greater attention.

The relationship between historical writing and nationalism further strengthens this argument. Mingheria's movement towards political independence is accompanied by the development of a distinct national identity. Once a political community begins to imagine itself as a nation, it also needs a shared account of its past. Historical events, individuals, conflicts, sacrifices, and achievements can acquire new meanings within this emerging national consciousness. Events once described negatively may later be remembered as moments of resistance or liberation. In this way, Pamuk demonstrates that national history can be shaped by the political needs and identities of the present. The connection between Mingherian nation-building and national historiography has been identified as an important political dimension of the novel.

Political authority is another major factor in the construction of historical knowledge. The plague creates a situation in which governments and officials attempt to regulate movement, information, quarantine, and public behaviour. Under such circumstances, the control of information becomes closely connected with the exercise of political power. Official institutions can influence which events are documented, which explanations are circulated, and which voices are given legitimacy. Pamuk therefore presents the management of the epidemic as more than an administrative or medical issue. It also becomes a question of authority and knowledge. The relationship between political control and the representation of truth is one of the important concerns identified in the existing discussion of the novel.

At the same time, *Nights of Plague* gives considerable importance to personal memory. Official historical records can preserve dates, decisions, political developments, and statistical information, but they may not fully communicate the emotional experiences of people who lived through an event. Personal letters and memories can preserve fear, loneliness, confusion, grief, and uncertainty that are often absent from institutional records. Princess Pakize's letters are particularly significant in this context because they provide a personal perspective that can complicate official descriptions of the plague and its consequences. The contrast between official documentation and personal recollection suggests that historical understanding may become richer when different perspectives are allowed to exist alongside one another.

Mina Mingerli's dual position as historian and storyteller brings these concerns together. She attempts to reconstruct a past that she did not personally experience, yet she must give shape and meaning to incomplete and sometimes contradictory

evidence. In doing so, she performs a task that has similarities with literary storytelling. Both the historian and the novelist select information, establish relationships between events, interpret motives, and construct a narrative through which readers can understand the past. Pamuk's use of a fictional historian consequently draws attention to the narrative processes involved in historiography. The distinction between the historian and the storyteller becomes particularly unstable because both depend on interpretation to make the past intelligible.

Pamuk also gives the reader an active role in deciding how historical truth should be understood. Rather than providing one unquestionable version of events, the novel presents different sources, memories, and interpretations. The reader must therefore assess the reliability of the narrator and the various accounts within the narrative. Contradictions become part of the reading experience rather than problems that must necessarily be resolved. This strategy encourages readers to recognise that historical knowledge is often constructed through competing interpretations rather than through a single, universally accepted account.

Against this background, the present study examines *Nights of Plague* as a literary exploration of the relationship between historical truth and its construction. It focuses particularly on five interconnected areas: the unstable boundary between history and fiction, the authority of archives, the role of personal memory, the relationship between nationalism and historical narratives, and the influence of political power on the production of historical knowledge. It also examines Mina Mingerli's role as a fictional historian and considers how Pamuk transfers part of the responsibility for evaluating historical truth to the reader.

The central argument of this study is that *Nights of Plague* does not present history as a fixed and completely objective record of the past. Instead, it portrays historical knowledge as something shaped through evidence, interpretation, memory, political authority, and narrative imagination. Pamuk's fictional island of Mingheria provides a space in which these forces can be observed working together. The novel consequently asks readers to look beyond the question of what happened and to consider another equally important question: who has the power to determine how what happened will be remembered?

By raising this question, Pamuk moves beyond the conventional boundaries of the historical novel. *Nights of Plague* becomes a reflection on the nature of historiography itself. It encourages readers to recognise that some voices are preserved while others disappear, that some records receive greater authority than others, and that collective memories can change as political and cultural circumstances change. The question of who writes history therefore leads inevitably to another question: whose history remains unwritten? This study argues that Pamuk's novel derives much of its significance from keeping this question open and inviting readers to reconsider the relationship between history, memory, power, and truth.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- Ayyıldız (2026) examines *Nights of Plague* as historiographical metafiction and argues that the novel questions the possibility of recovering the past as an



absolute truth. Mina Mingerli's role as a fictional historian highlights the difficulty of separating historical fact from narrative interpretation.

- Tarhan (2022) focuses on nation-building and national historiography in the novel. Her study shows how the political transformation of Mingheria is connected with the creation of a collective national identity and a new understanding of the past.
- Umman (2021) explores the relationship between the plague and different forms of authority. Her study shows how political and intellectual authority is challenged during the epidemic, making the novel an important reflection on power and knowledge.
- Lekshmi (2026) studies the cultural and literary representation of plague narratives in Pamuk's novel. She highlights how the novel brings together historical experience and literary imagination, making the representation of the plague itself a question of narrative construction.
- Bugeja (2025) examines Mingheria's emergence as a separate political entity. His study demonstrates how Pamuk uses the fictional island to explore political transformation, identity, and the changing Ottoman world.

Pamuk's *Nights of Plague* itself provides the primary literary material for examining these issues. Through Mina's reconstruction of the past, conflicting sources, personal memories, and political narratives, the novel raises questions about who has the authority to define history. Taken together, the existing studies show that history, memory, nationalism, fiction, and political power are closely connected in the novel. The present study brings these perspectives together to examine how Pamuk challenges the idea of a single and completely objective historical truth.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine how Orhan Pamuk's *Nights of Plague* challenges the idea of history as an objective and fixed record by exploring the relationship between history, fiction, memory, and narrative interpretation.
2. To analyse how political power, nationalism, archives, and competing memories influence the construction of historical truth in *Nights of Plague*.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research methodology to examine the representation of historical truth in Orhan Pamuk's *Nights of Plague*. The novel is treated as the primary source, while relevant scholarly articles, books, and critical studies are used as secondary sources.

The study uses close textual reading to analyse selected passages, characters, narrative techniques, letters, archival references, and historical accounts presented in the novel. The analysis focuses on two major areas: first, how Pamuk questions the idea of history as an objective and fixed record; and second, how memory, political power, nationalism, archives, and competing narratives influence the construction of historical truth.

The study is also informed by the concept of historiographical met fiction, which helps examine the novel's

deliberate blending of historical references with fictional elements. Mina Mingerli's role as a historian and narrator is given particular attention because her attempt to reconstruct the past demonstrates the importance of selection, interpretation, and narrative in historical writing.

Secondary scholarship by Ayyıldız, Tarhan, Umman, Lekshmi, and Bugeja is used to support and contextualise the textual analysis. The study does not attempt to establish a single factual interpretation of the novel. Instead, it examines how Pamuk presents different versions of the past and encourages readers to question who has the authority to define historical truth.

Thus, the methodology combines close reading, thematic analysis, and interpretive literary criticism to understand the relationship between history, fiction, memory, nationalism, and political power in *Nights of Plague*.

5. INTERPRETATION

5.1 History and Fiction: Questioning Historical Truth

One of the central concerns of *Nights of Plague* is the uncertain relationship between history and fiction. Pamuk creates Mingheria as a fictional island but places it within the recognisable historical setting of the late Ottoman Empire. Through this combination, the novel encourages readers to question where historical fact ends and literary imagination begins.

Mina Mingerli is particularly important to this process. She presents herself as a historian who attempts to reconstruct the history of Mingheria from different sources, including letters, memoirs, official documents, and other accounts. However, these sources do not always provide the same version of events. Mina must therefore select, compare, and interpret the available evidence. Her role shows that writing history is not simply a matter of collecting facts; it also involves decisions about how those facts should be connected and understood.

The fictional historian therefore becomes a way for Pamuk to question the possibility of completely objective historical writing. The past may have happened only once, but later generations can produce different accounts of it. In this sense, *Nights of Plague* suggests that historical truth is shaped not only by evidence but also by the person who interprets that evidence.

5.2 Archives and the Construction of Historical Knowledge

The novel also questions the assumption that archives automatically provide an unquestionable record of the past. Mina depends on various forms of documentary evidence, but the existence of documents does not necessarily make their interpretation simple or objective.

Official records are produced within particular political and social circumstances. Personal letters and memoirs, meanwhile, reflect the experiences and emotions of individuals. When these sources disagree, the historian cannot simply reproduce them without interpretation. The historian must decide how to understand their differences.

This makes the archive an important part of Pamuk's larger argument. Documents preserve certain voices, but they may also leave other experiences unrecorded. Therefore, the historical record is shaped partly by what was documented and what survived. The novel suggests that archives should not be



treated as completely neutral spaces. They are sources of evidence, but they still require interpretation.

5.3 Memory and Personal Experience

Personal memory provides another important way of understanding the past in *Nights of Plague*. Official histories usually concentrate on political decisions, major events, institutions, and dates. Personal memories, however, can reveal how those events were experienced by individuals.

Princess Pakize's letters are particularly significant because they provide a personal perspective on the plague and its consequences. Through such personal accounts, readers encounter emotions and experiences that may not appear in official documents. Fear, uncertainty, loneliness, and confusion become part of the historical experience.

Pamuk therefore places official history and personal memory alongside one another rather than allowing one to completely replace the other. The difference between them suggests that historical understanding may be more complicated than a single authoritative account. Personal memory can challenge official narratives and remind readers that large historical events are also experienced through individual lives.

5.4 Nationalism and the Rewriting of the Past

The development of Mingherian nationalism adds another dimension to the question of historical truth. As Mingheria moves towards political independence, the island requires a collective identity. Such an identity is often supported by stories about a shared past.

Pamuk shows that the meaning attached to historical events can change when political circumstances change. Individuals who were once regarded as rebels or criminals may later be remembered as national heroes. Events that were previously interpreted as acts of disorder may be presented as important moments in the struggle for independence.

This demonstrates that history can become part of nation-building. A nation does not depend only on territory and political institutions; it also depends on a shared understanding of its past. Consequently, the writing of national history can influence how a community understands itself.

5.5 Political Power and Historical Truth

Political power is closely connected with the production of knowledge in the novel. During the plague, government authorities attempt to regulate movement, information, and public behaviour. The control of information becomes an important aspect of political control.

This has consequences for the way events are remembered. When powerful institutions determine which information is officially recognised, they can influence how later generations understand the past. Official accounts may become more influential than individual memories simply because institutions possess greater resources and authority to preserve and circulate their version of events.

Pamuk therefore connects political power with historical representation. The question is not only whether information is available, but also who controls it and whose interpretation receives authority. The novel consequently encourages readers to be cautious about accepting official narratives as the only possible version of historical truth.

5.6 Mina Mingerli: The Historian as Storyteller

Mina Mingerli represents one of the most important narrative ideas in the novel. She is both a historian and a storyteller. Her task is to reconstruct events that occurred long before her own time, using incomplete and sometimes contradictory evidence.

To make the past understandable, Mina must create connections between events and people. She must organise information into a narrative. This process resembles storytelling because historical evidence becomes meaningful only when it is arranged and interpreted.

Pamuk does not suggest that historians simply invent the past. Rather, he draws attention to the fact that even evidence-based historical writing involves interpretation. Mina's role therefore exposes the narrative dimension of historiography and reinforces the novel's questioning of absolute historical objectivity.

5.7 The Reader and the Question of Truth

Pamuk does not give the reader one final version of historical truth. Instead, the novel presents different sources, memories, and perspectives and allows the reader to consider their reliability. As a result, the reader becomes part of the process of interpretation. Rather than passively accepting Mina's account, readers are encouraged to notice contradictions and consider why different versions of events exist.

This is an important feature of the novel's treatment of history. Pamuk does not simply replace one authoritative version with another. He makes the process of constructing historical knowledge visible. The reader is therefore encouraged to ask not only, "What happened?" but also, "Who is telling me what happened, what evidence are they using, and why should I believe this version?"

5.8 Overall Interpretation

Taken together, these elements demonstrate that *Nights of Plague* is deeply concerned with the construction of historical truth. History and fiction overlap through the fictional island and the historian-narrator; archives provide evidence but do not remove the need for interpretation; personal memories challenge official accounts; nationalism gives new meanings to the past; and political authority influences the production and preservation of knowledge. The novel therefore presents historical truth as a complex process rather than a fixed object. Pamuk's central concern is not to provide one final answer about the past but to make readers aware of the forces that shape historical narratives. The novel ultimately suggests that understanding history requires attention not only to surviving evidence but also to the people, institutions, memories, and political interests that determine how that evidence is interpreted.

In this sense, the question "Who writes history?" has no single answer. Historians, governments, witnesses, communities, writers, and individuals who preserve memories can all contribute to the construction of the past. The more important question is perhaps whose voices receive authority and whose experiences remain outside the historical record.



6. FINDINGS

The study of Orhan Pamuk's *Nights of Plague* leads to several important findings concerning the relationship between history, fiction, memory, nationalism, and political power.

First, the study finds that Pamuk challenges the idea that history is a completely objective and fixed record of the past. Through Mina Mingerli's role as a fictional historian, the novel shows that historical knowledge depends on the selection, interpretation, and organisation of evidence. The historian does not simply discover the past but participates in constructing a meaningful account of it.

Second, the study finds that the novel presents archives and historical documents as useful but not completely neutral sources of knowledge. Official records, letters, memoirs, and other accounts may provide different or contradictory versions of the same events. This demonstrates that documentary evidence requires interpretation before it can become a historical narrative.

Third, personal memory emerges as an important alternative to official history. The experiences preserved through personal letters and memories reveal emotional and individual dimensions of the plague that may not appear in official records. The novel therefore suggests that historical understanding becomes more complex when personal experiences are considered alongside institutional accounts.

Fourth, the study finds a close relationship between nationalism and the construction of history. The development of Mingherian identity requires a shared understanding of the island's past. As political circumstances change, the meaning of earlier events and the reputation of historical figures can also be transformed. History consequently becomes part of the process of nation-building.

Fifth, political authority influences the production and circulation of historical knowledge. The management of information during the plague demonstrates how powerful institutions can influence what is recorded, communicated, preserved, or forgotten. The novel therefore connects political control with the control of knowledge.

Finally, the study finds that Pamuk gives the reader an active role in evaluating historical truth. By presenting competing sources and perspectives, the novel avoids offering one unquestionable version of the past. Readers are encouraged to assess evidence, recognise contradictions, and consider the authority of different narrators. Thus, *Nights of Plague* presents historical truth as a process of interpretation rather than as a single, permanent answer.

7. SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following suggestions are offered:

1. Historical narratives should be examined critically. Readers should not automatically assume that official documents or established historical accounts represent the complete truth. Different sources and perspectives should be considered.
2. Personal memories should receive greater attention in the study of history. Individual letters, testimonies, and experiences can provide valuable insights into the human dimensions of major historical events.

3. The relationship between history and political power should be examined carefully. Researchers should consider how political institutions influence the production, preservation, and circulation of historical knowledge.
4. National histories should be approached with critical awareness. The creation of national identity can influence how particular people, events, and conflicts are remembered. Recognising this process can help readers understand the difference between historical evidence and later political interpretation.
5. Literary works should be considered valuable spaces for questioning historical knowledge. Novels such as *Nights of Plague* can encourage readers to examine the relationship between fact, memory, imagination, and interpretation.
6. Further research may compare *Nights of Plague* with other historical novels. Comparative studies could examine how different writers represent archives, memory, political authority, nationalism, and contested versions of the past.
7. Future studies may also explore the relationship between pandemic narratives and historical memory. Such research could examine how societies remember epidemics and how literary representations contribute to those memories.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined Orhan Pamuk's *Nights of Plague* as a literary exploration of historical truth and the processes through which the past is constructed. The analysis shows that the novel is concerned with much more than the representation of a plague epidemic in the Ottoman world. Through its fictional island of Mingheria, its historian-narrator Mina Mingerli, its competing sources, and its political conflicts, the novel questions how historical knowledge is produced and authorised.

The first objective of the study was to examine how Pamuk challenges the idea of history as an objective and fixed record. The analysis demonstrates that Mina's attempt to reconstruct the past depends on selecting, comparing, and interpreting different forms of evidence. The presence of conflicting sources makes it difficult to establish one completely authoritative account. History therefore appears not as something that can simply be recovered but as something that must be interpreted and narrated.

The second objective was to analyse how memory, political power, nationalism, and archives influence the construction of historical truth. The study finds that these elements are closely connected. Archives preserve evidence, but they do not automatically guarantee objectivity. Personal memories provide experiences that may be absent from official records. Political authority influences the production and circulation of information, while nationalism can give new meanings to earlier events as a community develops its political identity.

Mina Mingerli's position as both historian and storyteller is central to Pamuk's treatment of these issues. Her narrative reminds readers that even evidence-based history requires organisation and interpretation. The reader is consequently not asked simply to accept one version of events. Instead, the reader must consider different accounts and decide how they might be understood. The significance of *Nights of Plague* therefore lies in its ability to make the process of historical construction visible. Pamuk does not argue that the



past has no reality or that evidence is meaningless. Rather, he shows that our knowledge of the past is mediated through documents, memories, narrators, institutions, political interests, and cultural interpretations.

Ultimately, the question “Who writes history?” cannot be answered by naming a single historian or institution. History is shaped by those who record events, preserve documents, tell stories, remember experiences, exercise political authority, and interpret the surviving evidence. Pamuk’s novel encourages readers to move beyond asking only what happened and to ask who has been given the authority to tell what happened. The novel’s final implication is therefore both literary and historical: understanding the past requires attention not only to the voices that have been preserved but also to the voices that have been neglected or forgotten. In this sense, *Nights of Plague* invites readers to approach historical truth with greater curiosity, caution, and openness to competing perspectives.

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