

## 28. Games of make-believe as a form of communication in Burhan Sönmez's *İstanbul İstanbul*

Naçme NAYEBPOUR<sup>1</sup>

**APA:** Nayebpour, N. (2023). Games of make-believe as a form of communication in Burhan Sönmez's *İstanbul İstanbul*. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (Ö13), 486-495. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1379423.

### Abstract

The contemporary Turkish novelist Burhan Sönmez's third novel *İstanbul İstanbul* (2015) is primarily a narrative about the power of storytelling in a life-threatening context. Four prisoners try hard to overcome the painful flow of time in their underground cell through recounting, remembering, and (re)constructing stories. By connecting the four totally strange characters together, storytelling alleviates their agony and distress through enabling them to find relief in the alternative worlds and/or realities. As it is mainly argued in this paper, the prisoners' storytelling activity depends on their games of make-believe which are used as the primary means of communication among them. Through their pretence, the prisoner-narrators replace the horrible reality of the cell with the pleasant alternative realities of the storyworlds they recount. Thus, by referring to Kendall Walton's theory of Games of Make-Believe, the present paper tries to show how by acting as *props* the recounted stories in Sönmez's *İstanbul İstanbul* are used as the means of communication to evoke the readers' (emotional) response and encourage their active participation in the characters' mimetic pretence.

**Keywords:** Storytelling, games of make-believe, fictionality, Burhan Sönmez, *İstanbul İstanbul*

## Burhan Sönmez'in *İstanbul İstanbul* Adlı Romanında Bir İletişim Aracı Olarak Yap-İnan Oyunları

### Öz

Çağdaş Türk romancı Burhan Sönmez'in üçüncü romanı *İstanbul İstanbul*'da hayatı tehlike altında olan karakterlerin maceraları ele alınmaktadır. Yeraltı hücrelerinde hikâyeler anlatan dört mahkûm, geçmiş hayatlarına ait deneyimleri hatırlayarak ve onları yeniden inşa ederek zamanın acı dolu akışının üstesinden gelmeye çalışırlar. Yabancı dört karakteri birbirine bağlayan hikâye anlatımı, karakterlerin alternatif dünyalarda ve gerçekliklerde acılarını ve sıkıntılarını hafifleterek onların rahatlamalarını sağlar. Bu makalede tartışıldığı gibi, mahkûmların hikâye anlatma faaliyetleri, aralarındaki temel iletişim aracı olarak kullandıkları hayal ürünü oyunlara bağlıdır. Mahkûm-anlatıcılar, hücrenin korkunç gerçekliğinden koparak orada yaşadıklarını hikâye dünyalarının rahatlatıcı gerçeklikleriyle değiştirirler. Bu nedenle, makalede Kendall Walton'un Yap-İnan Oyunları teorisine atıfta bulunularak, Sönmez'in *İstanbul İstanbul*'unda iletişim aracı olarak anlatılan hikâyelerin okuyucunun (duygusal) tepkisini nasıl uyandırdığı ve onların oyunlarla kurguya nasıl dahil edildiğiyle beraber hikâyelerin sahne malzemesi olarak nasıl kullanıldığı yansıtılmaya çalışılmıştır.

<sup>1</sup> Assist. Prof. Dr., Agri Ibrahim Cecen University, Faculty of Science and Letters, Department of English Language and Literature (Agri, Türkiye), nnayebpour@agri.edu.tr, naghme.varghaiyan@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-6838-7876 . [Araştırma makalesi, Makale kayıt tarihi: 26.08.2023-kabul tarihi: 23.10.2023; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1379423]

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Hikâye Anlatımı; yap-ınan oyunları; kurgusallık, Burhan Sönmez; *İstanbul İstanbul*

## Introduction

Burhan Sönmez (b. 1965) is a contemporary Turkish novelist who has published five novels since 2009. His third novel *İstanbul İstanbul*, published in 2015, can be read as an attempt to restore validity to the power of story and storytelling in our time. With dispersed references to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and *The One Thousand and One Nights*, Sönmez draws to his readers' attention the role of storytelling in the similar tough contexts where storytelling was used for the equivalent functions both in the Eastern and the Western communities. The characters' frequent references to the stories in both collections play a central role in the construction and content of Sönmez's narrative. From this perspective, *İstanbul İstanbul* is an intersection of the two geographical poles as its content and mode of narration share many similarities with both the Eastern and Western traditions of storytelling. Besides the centrality of the local issues in the construction of narrative in *İstanbul İstanbul*, the shared stories in the (Middle Eastern) region and the universal conventions and techniques of storytelling play a fundamental part in its fabrication. In other words, by imitating the complex nature of the represented Istanbul, the narrative as the story of the city is presented as a junction where the imagination and techniques of the East and the West meet each other.

*İstanbul İstanbul* is a presentation of fictional minds overflowing with stories. It is a narrative about the complexity of Istanbul, a typical Eastern city where stories are integrated into people's daily lives and fantasy is a collective treasure. Although a political issue at a particular historical moment lies in its background, *İstanbul İstanbul* mainly presents storytelling as a crucial aspect of popular culture and its function in manipulating reality. Thus, as Ayşegül Turan (2023) highlights: "Through the power of imagination and storytelling of the protagonists," Sönmez in *İstanbul İstanbul* "represents the resilience of the prisoners and their will to live." The two qualities stipulated in Turan's statement—the prisoners' endurance and determination—are best represented through their games of make-believe. In other words, their acts of storytelling provide for them a mental means through which they surpass the daily physical torture inflicted upon them by the interrogators. Thus, although the whole story takes place in a monotonous confined space, it encompasses diverse vast mental spaces or cognitive frames designed by the author to ease the prisoners' distress.

The four prisoners in *İstanbul İstanbul* are traumatized storytellers. In a time of torture and suffering, storytelling provides them with an instant escape from the distress of their immediate context. Conversational storytelling is presented as an inherent activity in Sönmez's novel. Four characters spontaneously narrate tales to one another as a means of passing time in their challenging circumstances. "Natural narrative," according to Monica Fludernik (2002), is "naturally occurring' storytelling [... and] spontaneous conversational storytelling" (p. 10). The stories recounted by the four prisoners emerge as an organic component of their intermittent conversations. Sönmez's prisoner-storytellers have a function similar to what Scheherazade does in the *Arabian Nights*—they tell stories to entertain, overcome time, neutralize, or postpone pain, and more importantly manipulate each other's minds. Therefore, the main effect of their storytelling act is emotional.

*İstanbul İstanbul* is narrated in ten parts, each depicting a daily life within the boundaries of a 2m<sup>2</sup> cell. Every part begins with a folk tale recounted by one of the four prisoners in the intradiegetic level where storytelling, according to Fludernik, "occurs within the narrative, as is the case when, for example, one

character recounts something to another” (p. 157). As a result of the stories recounted by the prisoners, the intradiegetic level, rather than the diegetic one, is presented as the primary narrative concern. It is a space or level where prisoners tell their stories. They intermittently tell stories to each other, remember some scenes from their past lives, and/or (day)dream when they are alone. Having recounted his story, the first-person narrator in each part presents an account of the day by focusing on the dialogues among themselves about their past and present situations. The characters called Doctor and the Student Demirtay are each the narrators of three days, and Kamo the Barber and Uncle Küheylan each narrates accounts of the two days in the cell.

### **Fictionality and Games of Make-Believe**

*İstanbul İstanbul* is a piece of fiction as much as a representation about the constructed nature of fiction. In other words, it is a narrative about the constructedness of fiction as well as a mimetic work of art. The prisoners' creativity in discovering an independent mode of communication by using stories as a means of pretention or make-believe entirely depends on the mimetic qualities of their storytelling activities. To put it another way, the main goal of the prisoners' manifestation is communication. Their storytelling is an imagination-dependent mimetic practice designed by the author to serve the prisoners as a medium of communication with one another as well as with the (implied) reader and/or audience.

From Plato onwards, there have been various theories regarding what a piece of fiction is and what comprises its main qualities, or fictionality. Kendall L. Walton's definition of fictionality derives from a philosophical and aesthetic approach. Walton's theory mainly depends on the games of make-believe. He states that: “Make-believe is a pervasive element of human experience” (1990, p. 7). A “role in *make-believe*,” according to Walton, is “common” in “all representations.” In other words, “make-believe (or imagination, or pretence) of *some* sort is central, somehow, to ‘works of fiction’” (1990, pp. 4-5, emphasis original). Walton's theory of make-believe is based on some shared conventions between authors and readers. According to him, from their childhood, human beings are familiar with games of make-believe:

Children devote enormous quantities of time and effort to make-believe activities. And this preoccupation seems to be nearly universal [...] it would be surprising if make-believe disappeared without a trace at the onset of adulthood [...] It continues, I claim, in our interaction with representational works of art [...] The forms make-believe activities take do change significantly as we mature. They become more subtle, more sophisticated, less overt. (1990, pp. 11-12)

Of the benefits of make-believe, Walton states that: “It helps one to understand and sympathize with others, that it enables one to come to grips with one's own feelings, that it broadens one's perspectives” (1990, p. 12). Functioning based on imagination, make-believe plays a fundamental role in the readers' communication with the storyworld, as a representational work of art, and their interpretation and understanding of it. As Walton argues, games of make-believe: “Are one species of imaginative activity; specifically, they are exercises of the imagination involving *props*” (1990, p. 12, emphasis original). Walton defines props as: “Generators of fictional truths, things which, by virtue of their nature or existence, make propositions fictional” (1990, p. 37). “Representational works of art,” such as works of fiction—novels, stories, and tales, according to Walton, are props and every prop “mandates imaginings” (1990, pp. 38 and 69).

Walton's make-believe account has been criticized for its consideration of a fictional narrative as an autonomous piece of representational art as well as for the readers' response in the form of the pretended, or quasi emotions. As highlighted by Gammelgaard et al. (2022), Walton's definition and description of fictionality: “Is located in the reader's real-world activity, and Walton's primary concern

is to characterize it—both the imaginative act of making-believe and the parameters of the games within which it takes place, which are set, in the case of literary fictions, by the text itself and the generic and cultural conventions upon which it depends” (p. 15). More specifically, Walton’s theory, as highlighted by Gammelgaard et al., has recently been criticised by the rhetorical approaches to fictionality for two reasons:

The first is that it is wholly oriented toward the reader’s imaginative response to fictional representations in themselves, and disregards our attention to their import as real-world communicative acts. [...] The second reason, indeed, is brought into sharpest focus by Walton’s treatment of emotional response to fiction. He quite properly resists any notion that responding to fiction involves psychological confusion between the real and the fictional. (2022, p. 15)

Richard Walsh (2019) also criticizes Walton’s theory by stating that: “Walton is surely right to reject the view that emotional response to fiction depends upon an immersive forgetting of its fictionality, but it is decidedly odd to conclude that we therefore have no genuine emotional involvement with fiction at all” (p. 405). However, as pointed out in Walsh’s theory, there are some common features between Walton’s mimetic approach of make-believe and the rhetorical approach to fictionality. For example, fictionality is defined by Simona Zetterberg Gjerlevsen and Henrik Skov Nielsen as: “Intentionally signaled, invention in communication” (2020, p. 23). The purposefully indicated state of the invention in a piece of narrative fiction, according to Gjerlevsen and Nielsen, is the salient quality of its fictionality. The fact that the central part of the anti-diegetic technique in *İstanbul İstanbul* is communication is in line with Gjerlevsen’s and Nielsen’s emphasis on communication in their definition of fictionality. According to them, of the four salient characteristics of fictionality, communication has a defining role in it: “Suggesting that fictionality must be communicated implies that it must be part of a communicative situation with a sender and a receiver, and therefore cannot be simply equated with invented objects or pure imagination” (2020, p. 23). Similarly, the focus on communication also is essential to Richard Walsh’s definition of fictionality as rhetoric: “Fictionality is best understood as a quality of fiction as communication, not a quality of its referent or object of representation. It is an assumption about the communicative act, rather than an attribute of some semantic or ontological product of that act” (2019, p. 398). To put it another way, as it is the case in *İstanbul İstanbul*, an invented or imaginary world without being communicated cannot and does not exist.

Make-believe or pretence plays a fundamental role in the prisoners’ ontological state in *İstanbul İstanbul*. The prisoners use storytelling and stories in their games of make-believe in order to overcome the tense and hostile atmosphere of the cell, to find emotional comfort, relief, or tranquillity in their confinement, and more importantly to communicate with each other in their invented alternative worlds/realities. The prisoners use stories deliberately to communicate with each other and with their own past in their unusual context. Thus, imagining is their main activity in the cell, and it plays the central role in their dreams, daydreams, and the stories they tell each other. Accordingly, through highlighting the centrality of the games of make-believe in his characters’ interactions and hence in the construction of his representation, Sönmez effectively suspends the fictionality aspect of his narrative and engages us in his characters’ games of make-believe by using a mimetic rhetoric. As a work of fiction, *İstanbul İstanbul* presents storytelling as a prop, or an event, which provides its readers with explicit cues. The prisoners’ stories are designed to evoke in readers the psychological sense of participating in their games of make-believe. Through their emotional participation in the prisoners’ games, readers may experience alterative realities along with them as they might willingly imitate their pretensions despite being aware of their fictional state. As do the prisoners’, the readers’ imaginings can also facilitate their communication with the represented storyworlds.

## Storytelling, Games of Make-Believe, and Communication

The games of make-believe in *İstanbul İstanbul* are spontaneous or automatic and autonomous. Without signalling the fictional state, or fictionality, of his storyworld, Sönmez engages his characters in a mimetic process of storytelling. Narrative construction, hence, becomes a natural part of the representation from its beginning. The recounted stories are not original as they are recreations or reconstructions of the previous versions of some short tales without identified authors. The four prisoners' narrations are their personal versions of some familiar stories. To be more specific, storytelling is their shared attempt to find an engaging manner of communication in their enclosure.

*İstanbul İstanbul* is a narrative made up of different storyworlds. The narratologist David Herman (2009) defines storyworlds: "As the worlds evoked by narratives; reciprocally, narratives can be defined as blueprints for a specific mode of world-creation" (p. 105). Through their stories, the prisoners create new worlds different from the highly confined world of the cell. In other words, the storyworlds they depict in their stories provide them with new worlds through disrupting the world wherein they are primarily situated. In his book *Basic Elements of Narrative* (2009), Herman discusses Worldmaking/World Disruption as one of the four constitutive elements of narrative by contending that: "The events represented in narrative are such that they introduce some sort of disruption or disequilibrium into a storyworld involving human or human-like agents, whether that world is presented as actual or fictional, realistic or fantastic, remembered or dreamed, etc." (p. 105, emphasis original). Through introducing different worlds, the prisoners' folk tales at the beginning of each part in the narrative act as a disturbance or imbalance in the monotonous world of the cell.

Demirtay's narration in the First Day is remarkable in terms of its content, mode of representation, the constructed nature of the recounted stories, and the function of the storyteller, as well as his audience, in the communicating process of the recounted stories. When he begins his account by a fable: "No one had ever seen so much snow in Istanbul [...] The two nuns in the thick of the snow" (Sönmez, 2016, pp. 1-3), Kamo intervenes and asks him to change the story: "Listen kid, can't you change that story and tell us something decent? It's fucking frigid in here as it is, isn't it bad enough freezing on this concrete, without having to tell stories of snow and blizzards as well?" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 3) Kamo's objection and request demonstrate not only the constructed or invented nature of storytelling within the fictional society in *İstanbul İstanbul*, but also it depicts the centrality of intention to communicate stories in Sönmez's narrative. Besides, it exemplifies the plasticity of the imaginary worlds since, as Walton contends, "Worlds of make-believe are much more malleable than reality is" (1990, p. 67). Storytelling in *İstanbul İstanbul* shapes the communicational contexts both within the narrative and beyond it. The characters' games of make-believe are based on imagining. Encouraged by Uncle Küheylan's stories, the prisoners imagine alternative realities distinct from the brutal reality of the prison environment. In his narrative, Burhan Sönmez illustrates the power of stories and the constructive use of storytelling. In terms of its effectiveness, the discovery of the stories in the cell resembles the finding of the fire for the early humans as it changes their lives fundamentally. Uncle Küheylan, who, as Demirtay describes, "carried so many words around in his head that he had more stories than there were streets in the city [Istanbul]" (149), summarizes the efficacy of the stories in the cell: "Demirtay smiled. Life had discovered that smile [...] and these stories in here" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 91).

Besides inventing new stories to pass the time and overcome a highly stressful context, the characters are consciously eager to exchange or communicate their stories. As it is signalled in its first day account, the primary narrative property, or the defining aspect of fictionality, in *İstanbul İstanbul* is invention or

worldmaking. Having heard Demirtay's story, when Kamo begins telling his own life story with some private details, Demirtay asks Doctor to warn him: "It's not a good idea for him to tell us so much about himself, let's warn him" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 13). Doctor agrees with him. Later, his warning words to Kamo demonstrates their vital need to stories and storytelling: "I'm going to tell you something important, Kamo. It's good to chat but there are rules in these cells. We don't know who is going to give in to the torture and confess all their secrets, or who is going to tell the interrogators whatever they hear in here. We can make small talk and share our troubles to pass the time, but we have to keep our secrets to ourselves" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 14). The so-called "chat" or "small talk" among the prisoner-storytellers, which Doctor refers to, is actually storytelling. In other words, the stories they tell each other spark their small talks and chats.

Through asking questions to each other, the prisoner-storytellers in *İstanbul İstanbul* talk about their stories. Solving a riddle or answering a question about a story sometimes engages them for some days. For example, when Uncle Küheylan tells a story named "The Hugary Wolf", he actively involves Doctor and Demirtay in the construction process of the story (Sönmez, 2016, pp. 76-77). Kamo also contributes to the construction of the story by objecting to Uncle Küheylan: "You tell stories set in the cold. You make it snow, you have the hunters get caught in the storm. You make this drafty cell even more drafty, you turn the concrete we sit on into ice. When I'm really cold you give me no choice but to be a wolf. I want to rip you to pieces and eat you" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 88). Kamo, thus, highlights the powerful impact of the stories that they tell each other on themselves.

Storytelling is the prisoners' tool to use against the suffocating feeling of timelessness and placelessness. By their games of make-believe, they can imagine time and place through the stories they tell each other. Their stories are mostly different versions of the same familiar stories they have heard before, or as Doctor says to Uncle Küheylan: "In this cell we tell each other stories that we already know" (Sönmez 38). Despite that, stories connect them together at the time of narration and, at the same time, to the past and future in the storyworlds. In Demirtay's words: "Life was short, and stories were long. We too wanted to become a story, to blend into the river known as life and flow with it. Telling stories was a way of manifesting that desire" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 145). As it is implied in Demirtay's words, storytelling, as a natural part of life, is a potential tool which can be used to solve a life-threatening problem and achieve a collective sense of identity and belonging.

The dynamic nature of the story time in *İstanbul İstanbul* annihilates the pressure of the clock time which is presented as timeless and/or static. As a result of Uncle Küheylan's and Demirtay's laughing at the end of his story named "The Bird of Time" on Sixth Day, Doctor contemplates on the function of stories in restoring their disappeared sense of time which happened as a result of being put in the underground cell: "The more we spoke the more we realized that we hadn't landed here out of a void, but that we had come from some external time. But which time? We tried to find out by telling each other stories, by following the scent of the present moment" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 122). In the reality of the cell, time is fixed. In Uncle Küheylan's words: "Every time I open my eyes, I see a black winged bird above me. The bird of time circles above us without ever flapping its wings" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 124). However, the time in their stories is in the storytellers' control. As Uncle Küheylan states, "Given that we don't know about time, then we're its masters. Here it's evening when we want it to be, and the sun rise when we want it to" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 125).

Stories take the prisoners to an ulterior world of ecstasy through making them to forget why they are, where they are. In doing so, stories bring them hope and protect them too, as Demirtay says: "We told

stories, drank raki, and listened to songs [...] We strove to forget about our wounds” (Sönmez, 2016, p. 165). The practical use of stories in *İstanbul İstanbul* is also highlighted in Çimen Günay-Erkol's reading of it. By highlighting the prisoners' practical use of stories as the only personal available resource against the traumatic atmosphere in the cell, she states that the: “Novel invites the reader to a lacuna, but in this lacuna there is excessive self-referential speaking, instead of silence and the prisoners' storytelling is a form of the circular logic of feeding a person with one's own power, similar to the symbolism of a serpent's eating its tail” (200-201).

Storytelling transports the four characters in *İstanbul İstanbul* to a new level where reality is suspended. The centrality of fantasy and the facilitating role of storytelling in it are highlighted in Doctor's account of the Second Day. Having been listening to his story of “the White Dog”, Uncle Küheylan begins recounting to him his father's stories about Istanbul: “My father used to talk about İstanbul so much that sometimes I couldn't tell what was the truth and what was make-believe” (Sönmez, 2016, p. 29-30). He points out the blurring of the boundary between fact and fiction in his father's stories. Not only did he tell stories about Istanbul, but also, he acted them out as if they were the truth:

“In the evenings my father used to make shadows on the wall in the lamplight with his hands, he would build cities with his skilled fingers [...] Then my father would say, I'll tell you a true İstanbul story that I witnessed with my own eyes.’ As he told the tale he would cast picture shadows on the walls with his fingers, taking us out of our tiny house and transporting us to that unknown city that was born in the lamplight and enveloped our nights with its vastness. I grew up on my father's stories.” (Sönmez, 2016, p. 30)

As it turns out in the stories Uncle Küheylan narrates from his father, the blending of fact and fiction in the fantasy worlds about which they tell stories to each other is a recurring theme in *İstanbul İstanbul* as a whole. When Doctor states that he presented fact as fiction in his story of Emilia and Ali the Lighter, Demirtay reminds him of the universality of the stories by saying: “Doesn't everything that's happened in the past and that we tell in words become a story, Doctor? Here there's no such thing as the past. Haven't we discovered that over these last days?” (Sönmez, 2016, p. 158)

Thus, in *İstanbul İstanbul* story becomes fact, and fact becomes story as the boundary between them disappears. When Demirtay asks Uncle Küheylan: “Is that story you told true, or did you make it up?” his answer emphasises the repeating theme of fictionality in *İstanbul İstanbul*: “What kind of a question is that Demirtay? Weren't you the one who just said that everything that happened in the past and that we tell in words becomes a story? Well, the reverse is also true. Every story we tell here occurred in the past and is totally true” (Sönmez, 2016, p. 163). Thus, in the absence of any sense of time, telling stories about different times is presented as the natural solution in Sönmez's narrative.

Everything in *İstanbul İstanbul* is a demonstration of the constructed nature of the narrative. The characters construct imaginary worlds within the imaginary world constructed by the author. As Uncle Küheylan admits, through making them “imagine” (Sönmez, 2016, p. 35) different lives at different situations, his father's stories helped them to escape the harsh realities of life at home. He draws inspiration from his childhood experiences and changes them into a collective behaviour in the cell. Looking at him through Doctor's eyes, we see how: “He used his hands and lips to pretend he was smoking” (Sönmez, 2016, p. 33). Soon Doctor realizes that: “Uncle Küheylan was not fantasizing, that those events in his head had really taken place” (Sönmez, 2016, p. 33). Doctor does not initially understand the implications and significance of Uncle Küheylan's fantasies and make-believes. When comparing himself to him, he finds himself more reasonable and realistic:

"I too liked playing with the truth, but although I fantasized about strolling in Istanbul with Demirtay I still remained anchored to the cell, I knew it was my boundary. My mind held onto the reins of my fantasies at all times. And it had never occurred to me to play the game by myself. But there was no question of illusion for Uncle Küheylan. It was all real. He could play when he was alone too, endowing the walls and the darkness with a different life. [...] As far as he was concerned there was no such thing as unreal. Feeling no need to go outside, he brought the world inside, transcending place as well as time here." (Sönmez, 2016, p. 34)

However, Uncle Küheylan's personal experience changes into a communal act within the cell as the four prisoners begin having imaginary experiences. For example, they begin throwing imaginary parties, going beyond the boundary of their cell, and walking around Istanbul etc. Uncle Küheylan's account of stories is a strong evidence for the constructed or invented nature of stories.

In his first narration in part Day Four, Uncle Küheylan remembers a personal experience from his childhood. Once he listened to the first part of a novel before the storyteller said she would recount the next instalment the following week. However, since the radio broke down, they could not listen to the new part of the novel. Instead, his father took the role of the storyteller in the radio by saying: "Don't worry I know the novel. Did he really know it? In the village he needed to know it and we needed to believe him. Before our very eyes, he unravelled the story that the woman on the radio told the man" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 75). His father's action is a demonstration of the arbitrary nature of the stories in general and the narrative plot in *İstanbul İstanbul* in particular.

The arbitrary nature of the plot formation/construction in *İstanbul İstanbul* is a strong signal of games of make-believe in it. In his hallucination and before telling his story "Yellow Laughter," Uncle Küheylan imagines asking Doctor: "Doctor, have I told you this story before? Really? This time I will tell you a different version" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 219). The four characters mostly tell the different versions of the same stories to each other. Thus, every storyteller presents an invented version of a familiar story. Having listened to the story "The Night Lights", narrated by Demirtay on the fifth day, when Uncle Küheylan protests that they changed the story plot by saying: "You don't just stop at telling stories you already know, you change them and mold them into whatever shape you want" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 96), Demirtay reminds him of exactly the same thing his own father did: "Didn't your father do the same thing, Uncle Küheylan? Didn't he fling the Istanbul sailors into the oceans in pursuit of white whales, didn't he bring the hunters in the wolf story all the way to Istanbul?" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 96) In another situation, when Doctor, after listening to the story of "The Pocket Watch" narrated by Demirtay, says: "You told me that story before, but the ending was different", Demirtay replies: "Just as you can't breathe in the same river twice [...] neither can you tell the same story twice in Istanbul" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 145). Thus, the presentational manner of the story, which in narrative studies is referred to as the *how* aspect of a given narrative, is the creative aspect of the prisoners' storytelling activity in *İstanbul İstanbul*. They play with the limited number of the stories they know by constructing as many plots as they need in their situation. Besides, they try to persuade each other into believing the constructed nature of their stories.

The prisoners' storytelling is mostly a result of automatic remembering. They recount their memories through turning them into stories. In other words, memory is a technique used for the invention and construction of the stories. Among all, Uncle Küheylan and Kamo are much more stuck in their memories. Uncle Küheylan says: "I was curious about my memory's limit. I didn't think of what I knew but of what I didn't know. The more I wanted to forget, the harder my memory tried to remember" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 80). He defines himself as: "A conqueror of fantasies" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 86). He describes life in the cell: "Like everyone else, I was more attached to what I hadn't seen than to what I had seen" (Sönmez, 2016, p. 87). Similarly, Kamo's storytelling is an act of remembering. As a result of



retrieving events from the past, he overcomes the dark and tight space of his cell. The world appears for him in the forms of stories: “Are there any untold stories, or unspoken words left in the world?” (Sönmez, 2016, p. 50)

While talking about the stories they tell each other in the cell, Doctor and Uncle Küheylan talk about *Decameron* (meaning ten days) too. The former tells the latter how, by running away from a plague epidemic in the city and taking refuge in a cottage, the characters in *Decameron* spent their time by telling each other stories: “They told us erotic stories, romantic stories, and scandalous stories, and they laughed a lot. They diluted their fear of the plague with stories that didn’t take life too seriously” (Sönmez, 2016, p. 128-129). However, Uncle Küheylan highlights the differences between themselves and the characters in *Decameron* by saying:

“But the people in *Decameron* are better off than us. They fled the city and escaped death. Whereas we’re in the depths of the city, tossed into the darkness. What wouldn’t we give to be with the people telling stories in the *Decameron* instead of in here, isn’t that right? They went there of their own free will, but we were brought us here against ours. Even worse, they got further away from death, but we’re getting closer [...] I think each story’s fate flows in a different direction.” (Sönmez, 2016, p. 130)

Uncle Küheylan, in other words, points out the different function of storytelling and the stories they tell each other in two different situations. Unlike *Decameron*, storytelling per se is the main object of storytelling in *İstanbul İstanbul*. Since the prisoners do not have any control over their own situation, storytelling turns out to be an involuntary act which is primarily used to forget the immediate moment through escaping from the real context to the imaginary times, places, and experiences.

In Uncle Küheylan’s imaginary conversation with Doctor in his dream-like account of the tenth day, which is also the last day of narration, he points out the connection between a story he heard from his father and the one Doctor narrated:

“Doctor, all the stories you told us from that book being funny reminds me of something my father told me. On his return from one of his trips to Istanbul my father said he had stayed in the underground cells and he told us about an island he had heard about from a seaman in his cell. According to the customs of that island, when someone died everyone congregated in the home of the deceased, and wailed and lamented until the middle of the night, then everyone went back home. Then, once the family members in the house of the mourning were alone, they would start talking and laughing and telling funny stories about the deceased. With each story they would explode into laughter, and as the stories went on, tears would roll down their faces. They call it yellow laughter. They think yellow is the right color for laughter that makes people forget death. What do you say doctor? Do you think it’s their need for yellow laughter that makes the noble ladies and gentlemen in the *Decameron* tell funny stories when they can feel death breathing down their necks?” (Sönmez, 2016, p. 231-232)

As it is demonstrated in Uncle Küheylan’s account, the prisoners in *İstanbul İstanbul* use stories to communicate with each other indirectly. For example, Doctor’s stories from *Decameron* and the stories Uncle Küheylan heard from his father are the mediums through which the four prisoners talk and exchange ideas on different issues. In doing so, they act as if they are a part of the represented worlds. Their intentional participation in the games of make-believe is also potential to evoke the same emotion in their readers/audience too.

## Conclusion

Burhan Sönmez in *İstanbul İstanbul* uses storytelling as a main part of his narrative techniques to communicate with his readers through a mimetic mode of narration in which the constructed sense of

storyworld, or its fictionality, is skillfully disguised. The quality of fictionality in Sönmez's narrative depends on the practice of storytelling and story sharing. The prisoners' games of make-believe depend on the short stories they tell each other mainly about themselves. The recounted stories transport them to alternative worlds which mainly function in accordance with their dreams, desires, and plans. They not only communicate with their own past lives through their stories but also the recounted stories evoke the communication among themselves possible. Accordingly, besides their entertaining function, the prisoners' storytelling acts have ontological functions too. Through their stories, they become so much entangled with their identity in the past that the prisoners mostly forget the painful context of their confinement. Apart from the short moments in which the prosecutors either bring one of them back from their painful interrogation or take one of them away to interrogation accompanied by torture, the prisoners spend their time both emotionally and mentally within the storyworlds they tell each other. Their games of make-believe, moreover, facilitate the narrative readers' communication with the text in a way that the bleak context of the underground cell does not block their participation in the optimistic alternative worlds resonated in the prisoners' stories. In other words, through imitating the prisoners' games of make-believe, the readers of *İstanbul İstanbul* primarily become engaged with the prisoners' colourful storyworlds rather than with the gloomy world of the cell.

### References

- Günay-Erkol, Ç. (2021). Gender of trauma in *İstanbul İstanbul*. *Middle Eastern Literatures*, 23(3), 198-209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1475262X.2021.1890384>
- Fludernik, M. (2009). *An introduction to narratology* (Trans., P. Häusler-Greenfield and M. Fludernik). Routledge.
- Fludernik, M. (2002). *Towards a natural narratology*. Routledge.
- Gammelgaard, L. R. et al. (2022). Introduction. In L. R. Gammelgaard et. al. (Eds.), *Fictionality and literature: core concepts revisited* (pp. 1-24). The Ohio State University Press.
- Gjerlevsen, S. Z. and Nielsen H. S. (2020). Distinguishing fictionality. In Cindie Aaen Maagaard, Daniel Schabler, and Marianne Wolff Lundholt (Eds.), *Exploring fictionality: conceptions, test cases, discussions* (pp. 19-40). University Press of Southern Denmark.
- Herman, D. (2009). *Basic elements of narrative*. Willey-Blackwell.
- Sönmez, B. (2016). *İstanbul İstanbul* (Trans., Ü. Hussein). Telegram.
- Turan, A. (2023). Representations of Istanbul at the intersection of modern Turkish literature and world literature. *Neohelicon* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-022-00679-1>