

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 5. Issue.4. 2018 (Oct-Dec)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A STUDY OF POST – TRUTH SOCIETY THROUGH THE NARRATIVE OF CHRISTOPHER  
PRIEST'S *THE PRESTIGE*

HARSHINIE SHRI S<sup>1</sup>, P. SUBHAPRIYA<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>IIM. A. English Literature, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women  
Coimbatore – 641004, Tamilnadu.

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor in English, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women  
Coimbatore – 641004, Tamilnadu



ABSTRACT

The term 'post – truth' is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotional and personal belief" (Oxford). Because of its universally pervasive relevance, post – truth was chosen as the Oxford dictionaries "Word of the Year" in 2016.

This paper analyses the narrative technique of Christopher Priest's 1995 novel *The Prestige* from the purview of post – truth. Using the concepts of 'slipstream' and 'cognitive dissonance,' the paper hypothesizes that the narrative of *The Prestige* can be used as a tool to decode the complex mechanism of how the post – truth narrative unfolds in today's society. This hypothesis can be used to analyze the significance of communication in the digital, post – truth world of today.

**Key words:** post – truth, slipstream, cognitive dissonance

Today, people live in a world where the election of the greatest superpower – the U.S. – eludes its own citizens, the reins of the biggest democracies are possibly in the hands of capitalist powers and the swarm of news dumped on netizens can seldom be proved true. These words of uncertainty such as 'elude,' 'possibly' and 'rumour' pervade the narratives of today, when people are officially labeled to inhabit a 'post – truth' society.

The term 'post – truth' is defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotional and personal belief" (Oxford). The term has become predominantly relevant in recent times, as it characterized the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum of the U.K. In both cases, voters experienced an overdose of contradictory statements and insubstantial claims surrounding the campaign and had to rely on 'half – truths' rather than the truth for their decision. Because of its universally pervasive relevance, post – truth was chosen as the Oxford dictionaries "Word of the Year" in 2016.

Every common citizen of today is a victim of the post – truth narrative. An increasingly popular genre of television goes by the name 'reality' where people watch shows such as 'Big Brother,' 'Keeping up with the Kardashians' in Hollywood, 'Big Boss,' 'Solvadhellam Unmai' and a number of dance shows such as 'Jodi No.1' in India, despite not knowing the answer to whether they actually depict the reality. There is also an onslaught

of false news, half – truths and conspiracies surrounding today's news world because of the advent of social media where every user becomes an audience, a narrator and a perpetuator. This has led to a dangerous trend of people becoming wanton victims of deception and being unable to separate fact from fiction. Thus post – truth has become a universal phenomenon.

In attempting to decode the complex mechanism of how the post – truth narrative unfolds in today's society, this paper analyses the narrative technique of Christopher Priest's 1995 novel *The Prestige* from the purview of post – truth. The findings of the paper aim at proving that the elusive mechanism of narratives in the post – truth era can be decoded through the narrative technique deployed by the author.

Christopher Priest is a British author born on 14 July 1943 in Cheadle, Manchester. Priest began his writing career in the 1960s with short stories, which he continued writing alongside his novels. He has published fifteen novels, four short story collections and is also known for his obituaries, critical works and children's non – fiction. He has written a tie – in novel to accompany the science fiction movie *eXistenZ* and has novelized the movies *Mona Lisa* and *Short Circuit*, for which he used the pseudonyms John Luther Novak and Colin Wedgelock.

Priest's noted works have won numerous accolades in the science fiction category. He has won the British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) award five times, for *Inverted World* in 1974, *The Extremes* in 1999, *The Separation* in 2002, *The Islanders* in 2012 and for his short story *Palely Loitering* in 1979. *The Prestige* won the 'James Tait Black Memorial Prize' in 1995 and the 'World Fantasy Award' in 1996. *The Separation* also won the Clarke Award in 2002. His other novels are *Indoctrinaire* (1970), *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (1972), *The Space Machine* (1976), *A Dream of Wessex* (1977), *The Affirmation* (1981), *The Glamour* (1984), *The Quiet Woman* (1990), *The Adjacent* (2013) and *The Gradual* (2016).

Christopher Priest has been widely acclaimed as a writer who has evaded being typecast in a particular genre. The recurring themes in his novels are post – war and post – industrial dystopia, extraterrestrial life, erasure of the difference between reality and imagination, time slippage, dual identity, memory distortion etc,. He is also known for having created an alternate reality island called "The Dream Archipelago" in his fiction.

Though Priest's writings have been classified under the categories of science fiction and fantasy, he aligns himself with the genre of slipstream, which is a relatively new label in English literature. Slipstream occupies an incipient position along the spectrum of mainstream fiction, science fiction and speculative fiction. The term was coined by author Bruce Sterling who defines it as a "... contemporary kind of writing which has set its face against consensus reality. It is fantastic, surreal sometimes, speculative on occasion" (*SF Eye*). Christopher Priest considers slipstream as an approach rather than a genre, associating it with the uncertain existence in a science – oriented world. In his introduction to Anna Kavan's slipstream novel *Ice*, he writes, "Slipstream induces a sense of otherness in the audience, like a glimpse into a distorting mirror, perhaps, or a view of familiar sights and objects from an unfamiliar perspective" (*Ice* n.p.).

*The Prestige* is a 1995 novel by Christopher Priest set in the England of late nineteenth century. The plot describes the rivalry between two leading stage magicians – Rupert Angier and Alfred Borden. The magicians are so intent on sabotaging each other's career that revenge becomes the purpose of their lives. Angier is obsessed with emulating Borden in his titular performance "The New Transported Man" where he disappears and reappears on the stage within a matter of seconds. In an attempt to outperform Borden, Angier is set on a wild goose chase for an innovative technique to create a stage double. He ends up becoming the slave of science by giving himself up for an extraordinary experiment by Nikola Tesla in which every particle of his body is transported to create a copy of himself, leaving behind a corpse at the end of each performance. Despite guessing it initially, Angier blinds himself to the simple but capital secret that drives the plot, which is the fact that Borden is using his identical twin brother as a double to reappear as himself. The techniques used by the two magicians to create their respective stage doubles becomes the most dangerous and elusive secret of their lives.

It is the epistolary form of the novel that makes it a reflection of the post – truth narrative. The novel unfolds as the diary accounts of the two magicians, each narrating the events between the events surrounding their rivalry from their respective perspectives. The reader is thus exposed to two problematically objective accounts of the same incidents, but is eternally deferred from knowing the actual truth about them. This feature of the post – truth narrative is akin to the theory of cognitive dissonance, which Priest uses in his novels. In his article “Cognition and Dissent” Christopher Priest defines cognitive dissonance as “. . . a state of mind in which two versions of reality or understanding are held at once, even though they are in conflict with each other.”

Postmodernism as a literary movement began when the western world had shed its last drop of faith in reason due to a continuous onslaught of wars and destruction. This disillusionment of reality gave way to ideas such as the disenfranchisement of the author, the death of grand narratives, the advent of unreliable narrators and narratives blurring the distinction between fact and fiction. In this sense, post - truth, with its dismissal of the relevance of truth, is an offshoot of postmodernism.

Borden and Angier are the postmodern unreliable narrators, who are given to deceive the audience by the very virtue of their profession of stage magic. The magical world of illusions that the protagonists inhabit is a perpetual symbol of the deception and treachery that encompass the narrative. Not only do the magicians deceive the audience during their performance, but they, as narrators, also deceive the reader by not being entirely true even in their personal diary entries, in order to maintain the secrets that lie in the heart of their profession.

The underlying deception is always on the surface both in their stage performances and in their narratives. Just as the audience of a magic show sees only what the illusionist allows them to see, the readers know only what the narrators allow them to know. The audience of a magical performance witnesses the tricks despite knowing that they are illusory, in the same way that the readers question how much of the story should be believed as the truth, while still reading on anyway. Similarly, the victims of a post –truth narrative discern only the half –truths that the media allow them to see, but they still fall into the vicious cycle of perpetuating them.

Borden begins his narration saying, “My name, my real name, is Alfred Borden” (*Prestige* 31), only for the reader to know later that it is not his real name. During his narration, Borden entices the readers to sign a “Pact of Acquiescent Sorcery” without their awareness, while he admits doing the same with his audience in a legerdemain performance. He affirms his narrative to be the absolute truth at one instance but upturns his claim immediately, saying that “I may write what I see fit, while I may add to it as I see fit” (*Prestige* 44). Amidst this, he ponders, “I think my account of what happened is accurate . . .” (*Prestige* 67), keeping the reader perpetually suspended between truth and fiction.

A similar phenomenon is currently experienced by the consumers of social media and reality shows, who willingly succumb to half – truths and alternative facts and have no means of knowing the truth. Borden’s description of his performance as “It was a lie, but it was one that was difficult to prove” (*Prestige* 53) is exactly the post – truth situation in social media and reality shows, which also has a huge bearing on the social psyche of the society.

Communication has ceased to be spontaneous in the digital age. Messages and posts can be edited and deleted, and forwarded messages can be passed off as authentic. People have the liberty to choose to project only that aspect of themselves which they wish to. Angier says, “I tore out all the pages where I described my rows with Henry” (*Prestige* 162). Angier’s diary is thus similar to a deleted Whatsapp message. The reader knows that it has been deleted, and the narrative thus fabricated, yet the reader reads on. The reader, just like the audience of magic, is not concerned whether the account is true, as long as it is engaging. This reflects the situation of today, where people are not concerned whether what they see and hear is true, as long as it is believable and worth sharing. This is the crux of post – truth – that ‘truth no longer matters.’

Thus, the narrative technique of *The Prestige*, filled with deception, misleading narrators and fabricated facts, is a reflection of the post – truth society and can be used as a tool to explore the significance of communication in the digital, post - truth age of today.

**Works Cited**

1. Kavan, Anna. *Ice*. 1967. Great Britain: Peter Owen publishers. 2011. Print.
  2. Priest, Christopher. *The Prestige*. Great Britain: Simon & Schuster, 1995. Print.
  3. ---. "Cognition and Dissent". [www.christopher-priest.co.uk](http://www.christopher-priest.co.uk). 3 Sep 2018. Web. 30 Nov 2018.
  4. Sterling, Bruce. "CATSCAN 5: Slipstream". *SF Eye*. No. 5. Retrieved 13 Sep 2014. Web. 25 Nov 2018.
  5. "Word of the Year 2016 is...". [www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com). 2016. Web. 30 Nov 2018.
-