

“By its very presence”: Conventionality and commonality in Shashi Deshpande’s realism

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Abstract

Shashi Deshpande’s persistent realism has gone largely unmarked in the scholarship on her work and yet provides an important example of the ways in which the Indian novel in English has continued to rewrite, rework, and yet ultimately keep up a dominant realist capacity. Reading her 1996 novel, *A Matter of Time*, I argue that Deshpande explicitly rejects a modernist and postcolonial aesthetic in favour of a pedestrian and decidedly conventional realism. In so doing, Deshpande favours the social over the metaphysical as the location of meaning, reanimating realism as an internal communal process of social and cultural inquiry. Reality, the novel seems to offer through its realism, is found not by a search for absent meaning or metaphysical depth, but by recognizing it in its shared social surface and conventional presence.

Keywords

commonality, Indian novel in English, middle-class, realism, Shashi Deshpande, surface reading

Shashi Deshpande’s 1996 novel, *A Matter of Time*, tells the story of a middle-class Indian family whose father, Gopal, in a crisis of conscience and self-doubt, leaves his family — a wife and three teenage daughters — and his job as a history professor. Gopal’s crisis of faith can be summed up in the words he rehearses (though never actually says) when preparing to explain his actions to Sumi, his wife: “*I stopped believing in the life I was leading, suddenly it seemed unreal to me and I knew I could not go on*” (Deshpande, 1999: 41; emphasis in original).¹ For Gopal, life *as it is lived* has become “unreal”, disengaged from its meaning, and therefore from reality, forging a chasm between the

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quotidian (“the life I was leading”) and metaphysical depth (“belief”). But though he continues searching — or talking about searching — for meaning throughout the novel, Gopal does not find the answer to that which will make his life “real” again. Note that Gopal’s use of “real” here, as it is articulated by its negation, “unreal”, does not mean that he has lost touch with reality, but rather that he has lost the ability to find purpose in it. In other words, the adjective “unreal” here denotes “meaningless” while “real” denotes meaningful.²

Gopal’s unspoken explanation contributes to the silence that dominates this and other Deshpande novels, whose family secrets and feuds, unresolved marital and emotional relationships, and memories of violence and oppression all find their expression in long, oppressive silences (Jain, 2003). These silences invite a search for what is left unsaid or stifled, not least because we are trained to read silence as a symptom of a buried reality. Indeed, characters and readers alike strive to reveal what lies underneath it. And yet, silence in *A Matter of Time* also seems to be an interpretative red herring. As we try to dismantle the layers of silence and lift them, searching for the meaning underneath, we might also miss recognizing that the depth that appears to lie beneath silence is but a distraction — and that meaning for Deshpande inheres in the surface, even if it is silent. I thus suggest that the novel’s ostensible investment in silences as markers of metaphysical or psychological depth is in fact a foil for what it really values, both in content and form: a common (shared) conventionality as a privileged mode of meaning-making. Put differently, the answer to Gopal’s crisis of meaning might be found not underneath the silences, but on the surface and in what I argue is the novel’s mundane, unmarked choice of realist form.

Indeed, as I shall presently show, the answer to Gopal’s philosophical quest to make life “real” is found not underneath the silences but in the form of the novel. *A Matter of Time*’s chapters alternate between two antinomic narrative modes: on the one hand, a first-person modernist rumination narrated by Gopal, and on the other, a more plot-and-description-driven realist mode narrated by the extradiegetic narrator. The narrative modes are pitted against each other in a dialectical relationship that correlates with the thematic oppositions between depth and surface, the philosophical and the social, but also serve to trouble them. Through my readings of these antinomies, I will suggest that the more metaphysical, modernist mode in fact serves as a foil for the social realist one, where the novel’s true philosophical stakes are worked out. Simply put, my argument is not only that *A Matter of Time* is a realist novel, but that its realism provides a structure of philosophical meaning, one that is neither universal nor metaphysical, but rather, communally and continuously constructed through accretion of quotidian detail.

One of India’s notable novelists in English, Shashi Deshpande was born in Karnataka, educated in Bombay (she has degrees in Law and English Literature), and has been living and writing in Bangalore since 1975. Publishing largely in the 1980s and 1990s, and at a slower rate to this very day, she has written more than 10 novels, many short stories, and a few children’s books. In addition to her fiction, she has also written works of literary criticism and has worked briefly as a screenwriter and journalist. Her work has been published by India’s leading presses as well as abroad, garnering numerous prizes — including India’s most prestigious Sahitya Akademi award in 1990 — and has been translated into other Indian and European languages (Bhalla, 2006). And yet, Deshpande

occupies what Arnab Chakladar (2006: 83) has called a “peculiar” status as “a globally celebrated writer” who, despite her prolific output since the mid-1970s, is nonetheless marginal in Western academic criticism — especially when compared with her prominence in Indian criticism (see also Batty 2010; Sebastian, 2000: 29–41). In a global literary and critical landscape which expects literature from the non-Western world to be both “representative” and “resistant”, Deshpande’s work — like that of other women of privilege — reads as neither. As Rosemary Marangoly George puts it, her novels are simply not written in “the political and linguistic scenarios in which resistance, as understood in the literary context, is formulated” (1996: 135). And indeed, scholarly accounts of her work commonly begin on a defensive note. It seems that critics are always implicitly or explicitly promoting or, more often, responding to one of two complaints against Deshpande’s fiction: first, that it is too “narrow [...] confined to the domestic and psychological space” of her educated, affluent middle-class female characters (Batty, 2010: 185); and second, that her prose is uninventive, simple, pedestrian, or realistic, and is thus easily cast on the wrong side of the favoured postcolonial aesthetic (Mangwani, 2009: 141). The two complaints are linked, interfacing along the lines of the much-derided “middlebrow”, an accusation that always seems to hover around Deshpande criticism (Batty, 2010: xviii; Rajan, 1993: 77; but see also Varma, 1998 whose excellent reading troubles this polarization). In my analysis of genre and meaning in the novel, however, I would like to suggest that the middlebrow is the source of Deshpande’s originality, rather than her derivativeness.

The first part of this paper will introduce the thematic oppositions set up by the novel — between the philosophical and the social, between surface and depth — and how they are conventionally gendered and valued. Focusing on the character of Aru, Gopal and Sumi’s daughter, I will show how these conventional oppositions are troubled by the quotidian details and pervasive silences that the novel presents as substantive. I will then go on to analyse the two narrative modes of *A Matter of Time*, arguing that while the novel frequently adopts a distinctly modernist sensibility, its more meaningful investment is in its realism. Finally, I will argue that Deshpande reanimates realism’s philosophical claims by employing the conventions of its form to construct a middle-class commonality whose strength and value accrue and abide in its common recognition of quotidian details.

Part I: Thematic oppositions

For all that he is given a voice and considerable narrative space to search for meaning, Gopal remains inscrutable throughout the novel. His motives never become clear, and he fails to understand himself or be understood by his family or the readers of the novel; he seems mired in an almost adolescent existential crisis. The fact that neither his ruminations nor his commonplaces actually lead anywhere, finally exposes them as empty and meaningless. As a result, what appears to be the novel’s central philosophical inquiry — a search for meaning — remains strangely unfocused, and ultimately reads like a cliché. This quality is reinforced when we realize that Gopal does not break new ground or ask new questions, but rather follows the long tradition of men who have renounced their worldly attachments and familial duties in search of their individual truths, a

tradition set up in the novel's opening epigraph: "'Maitreyi' said Yajnavalkya, 'verily I am about to go forth from this state (of householder)'" (n.p.). This initial quotation from the *Upanishads* is followed throughout the novel by additional allusions to men who have similarly renounced their material and social world. Drawing on sources ranging from Hindu mythology and epic to Western philosophy and literature, the novel presents Gopal as but another iteration, not only of an age-old tradition, but of a universal one. Moving from the *Mahabharata* to Camus; from Kierkegaard to the "higher truth" of the *Rig Veda* in his existential musings, Gopal exhibits his erudition and intellectual cosmopolitanism, but also, to a certain extent, undermines the philosophical particularity or authenticity of his own quest. Moreover, since Gopal often quotes these precedents himself, the novel shows how he performs renunciation as a ritual or incantation, rather than a radical break. Indeed, it often seems as though the novel — and Gopal — are more invested in staging a philosophical inquiry and its performance in the abstract, than in following its actual questioning and reasoning.

Not surprisingly, Gopal's investment in his universal role of "philosophical man" also reproduces gendered commonplaces regarding philosophical inquiry: "For a woman, from the moment she is pregnant, there is an overriding reason for living, a justification for life that is loudly and emphatically true. A man has to search for it, always and forever" (68). The burden of motherhood, he suggests, relieves women of the need to find meaning in life. By contrast, his deserted wife, Sumi, rejects Gopal's essentializing, refusing to make "what has happened in our family part of the war between men and women" (220). She is also the one who recognizes his investment in the opposition between the metaphysical and the social:

Just like Gopal [...] to give such an impossibly metaphysical reason for resigning a job. If I'd asked him, "why are you leaving me?" I'd have got just such an answer and what would I do with that? [...] Because, and I remember this so clearly, it was you who said that we are shaped by the age we live in, by the society we are part of. How can you in this age, a part of this society, turn your back on everything in your life? (27)

Sumi stresses not only the social but the detailed locality and the situatedness of the social, as opposed to the metaphysical universal. Even her experience of loss is articulated and understood through presence, rather than absence: it is only when she sees her husband interacting with his new surroundings that she realizes he is gone: "[S]he can suddenly see the *substance*, the *reality* of his life apart from her and their children. All those lives *contiguous* to his, spell out the *actuality* of their separation" (84–5; emphasis added). Gopal's desertion is made real by the material details of his new life with which he is "contiguous"; unlike him, she views his absence not as a disengagement from his daily life, but rather as a connection made with other lives.

Indeed, as Saikat Majumdar (2005) has shown, Sumi's focus on the details of their daily life is the backbone of the novel and, as I will argue, anchors its realistic form. But the association of Sumi with quotidian detail also risks referencing a sentimentalized or aestheticized concept of the detail, one which is once again essentially gendered, whereby the masculine is associated with the metaphysical, abstract, and epiphanic and the feminine is associated with the quotidian, with detail, and with the middlebrow.³ But the

novel presents Sumi and her motivations as being as inscrutable as Gopal's. Her passivity and complacency as she resettles herself and her daughters back into her natal home is strange and unexplained. If Sumi presents the social and relational as a response to Gopal's impotent metaphysics, we must admit that they, too, fail to provide an answer to the questions the novel insistently asks. Her death at the novel's end — just as she begins to emerge from her passivity — only intensifies our frustration at her inability to find meaning in the quotidian details with which she is associated.

But Sumi's failure does not mean that we need to discard the detail or the social as sites of meaning, but rather to think of them as meaningful in another way, one in which reality is not an absent entity referenced by the text, but is created through it. In other words, the novel signals a shift in the way we understand "the real" that gives realism its name. To see how this might work, we turn to the novel's oft-quoted opening paragraph, a description of the family home, the one in which Sumi was born and the one to which she returns with her daughters after Gopal's desertion:

The house is called Vishwas, not as one would imagine for the abstract quality of trust, but after an ancestor, the man who came down South with the Peshwa's invading army and established the family there. The name, etched into a stone tablet set in the wall, seems to be fading into itself, the process of erosion having made it almost undecipherable. And yet the house proclaims the meaning of its name by its very presence, its solidity. (3)

True to realist convention, the novel begins with a description of the house from the outside going in. This passage is undoubtedly rich in symbolic and metonymic meaning — from the name of the house and its fading stone tablet to the evocation of India's multi-layered history of conquest and colonization and its inseparability from the personal, the daily life of its residents/inhabitants. "And yet" the passage tells us, "the house proclaims the meaning of its name [Vishwas, meaning faith or trust] by its very presence, its solidity". In sum, faith and trust are not established through metaphor — by the absent tenor of this house-as-faith — but by metonymy, by its very presence, its "solidity".⁴ Extending this insight, we might contend that while Gopal's search for stable meaning leads him to fuzzy metaphysical depths, the novel implies in contrast that solidity is found in that which is present and readily apparent. The novel's realistic form offers an answer to Gopal's dilemma — and places its faith, "Vishwas", in the house and in its solidity. Reality, the novel seems to offer, is found not by a search for absent meaning, but by recognizing it in presence.

Understanding this requires a reassessment of the relationship between details and the reality they generate. Rachel Buurma and Laura Heffernan (2014: 82) point out that while transforming details from insignificant to significance, Roland Barthes' "reality effect" "reduces the horizon of meaning such that all realist details mean the same thing", that is, "the real". This in turn reinforces the subject's understanding of "history as natural and the 'real' as given. He or she then imagines that this meaning making is a secondary operation" (2014: 85). Similarly, Bruno Latour (2010: 477) advocates a "shift" from a realism that implies "a nature always there" to understanding reality as a common endeavour of "an assemblage to be slowly composed". Taking up these insights, I argue that the quotidian detail which fills this novel is not important in a Barthesian way

— referencing reality as an abstraction — nor as a figurative index to another, adjacent or similar meaning. Instead, I wish to show that the novel is invested in its quotidian details as a way to understand the *madness* of the object, that is, its constructed qualities. In this understanding, details do not refer to a specific extra-textual reality as a mimetic model would have it, nor do they refer to a general idea of reality that is a construct of the text, as post-structuralist thought would argue. Rather than a representation of meaning that is out there in the real world (whatever that may be) these details accrue to construct meaning *as already present* — and recognized as real — in the text.

In order to further explore this idea in the novel, I turn to Gopal and Sumi's eldest daughter, Aru, who, unlike her mother, does find meaning in the social through her engagement with detail. Aru contends with her mother's inability to cope and her father's crisis of faith by taking care of the day-to-day, immersing herself in what her grandmother, Kalyani, calls "this mustard seed of domestic life" (36). In contrast to her two parents, Aru stands out in sharp focus as the novel's active agent; she challenges generational and gendered stereotypes; and — most importantly — her actions focus on *making* meaning rather than discovering a meaning already posited. Aru's search for meaning is as relentless as her father's but is found elsewhere — in her attempt to understand social structures, not as indices to a deeper meaning that lies beneath them, but as sites of meaning in and of themselves.

Consider the following description of a portrait that hangs at the centre of the house, a portrait of Sumi's grandparents Manorama and Vilathro, who haunt its inhabitants. The description is focalized, significantly, through Aru, who sees in her great grandmother's portrait:

A stern, if rather voluptuously rounded face, almost blank in its inscrutability [...]

[Her great grandfather] Vilathro [...] is just as serious as his wife. In fact, the thick golden chain, giving the hint of a pocket-watch, and his gold-rimmed glasses add even more weight to the sense of solidity he conveys. And yet there's something, a glint of humor in the eyes perhaps, that hints at a man consciously presenting the façade that is expected of him for such a picture.

The lips, half-hidden under a bushy mustache, lifted in a small quirk at the corners, add to this impression. Whereas Manorama seems to be all of a piece: the pose is the woman. (117)

At the outset of the passage, Manorama is deemed inscrutable, but by its end we realize that the source of this inscrutability lies not in the fact that her superficial facial features belie her real (absent) personality, but that by searching for the absent real, we are scrutinizing in the wrong way. This is not a failed representation, but rather no representation at all: the "real" Manorama is not on the inside, but on the outside. Manorama embodies the conception in which representation does not reference an absent (or present) reality (like the relationship between her husband's façade and his "real" self, hinted at by the glint of humour in the eyes, and by the "hint" of a pocket-watch). Rather, what is real — "the woman" — is her photographic representation; the sum of details and social relations that make up her existence in the world are reality in itself: "The pose is the woman". The fact that the novel ends by the family's discovery of Aru's uncanny resemblance to her great-grandmother only further accentuates the ways in which "the pose" — the way one appears to the world — is neither false nor hollow. Rather, it is solid: a

solidity of form, a presence that can be, but is not necessarily, material or embodied. Aru's insistence on finding meaning in the actions of those around her (rather than the meaning behind the actions) is analogous to the reality created by the form of the novel.

With the logic of this argument, we return to the silences that pervade this novel and Deshpande's work as a whole. While silences are usually read as an absence — of information, of meaning — here, I argue, Deshpande presents them as meaningful presences. Not surprisingly, it is once again Aru who recognizes the way silence functions in the house:

It does not take Aru very long to realize that when the two women, Kalyani and Goda [her grandmother and great-aunt], speak of the past, they are playing cat's cradle, skillfully transferring the thread from hand to hand, from finger to finger, creating a design between them, a design that allows for certain facts to slip through. Clearly, there are stories concealed in the interstices of silence. (121)

Kalyani and Goda's conversations are constitutive of their lives: while they speak of a referent which is absent ("the past") they are also "creating" something new which is readily apparent (the "design"). These two referents not only exist simultaneously but continue to animate each other, in an endless game of cat's cradle. This is why there are "stories" (in the plural) in the silence and why they are concealed "in the interstices" rather than behind or beneath it. Interestingly, both absence, "the facts that slip through", and presence are generated by speaking. Silence is not, or not only, an absence but also a presence; it does not imply a lack of knowledge, but a reworking of knowledge into new form. Silence, writes Anuradha Roy about Deshpande's writing (1999: 87–8), is a "strategy" which takes "various shapes". The design skilfully created and recreated by the two women is similar to the solidity of the house in the paragraph quoted above: it is *made by* these conversations and *made of* them. The design itself, rather than what it stands for, is what matters, is what functions as real in the novel.

In fact, the two women's conversation generates three stories of silence: (1) the story they are silent about (the horrific story of the loss of Kalyani's son); (2) the story of the origins of the silence which permeates the house (Kalyani's punishment by her husband for losing their son); and (3) the no-less-horrific and ongoing effects of that silence, the story of silence as agent. Indeed, while in the novel's plot Aru actively searches for — and finds — the original cause of the silence, she realizes (as do the readers) that the reality woven by that silence in the decades that have followed the original event — and its potential to continue doing so in the novel's future — is far more meaningful. And indeed, in the novel's sequel, *Shadow Play* (2013), published almost 20 years later, silence continues to shape and structure Aru's life. Even though she has uncovered the secrets that it ostensibly hides — the loss of Kalyani's son and her subsequent punishment by her cruel husband — silence continues to function as a presence and agent in the house and within the family, preventing an older Aru from fully realizing the potential of her relationships with others. Unlike Deshpande's earlier novels, in which silence was always an index marking secrets, in her latest novel to date, silence is immanent and secret-less; it does not mark an absence but still functions as a presence — structuring social and familial relations.

Most importantly, the cat's cradle passage above stresses that Aru — who is the main actor and the focus of this passage — understands how silence works with ease and clarity. She does not “discover” what the two women are doing (the meaning behind the game of cat's cradle) but “realizes” it. The narrative underscores that the details were there all along, but needed Aru's recognition of them and the way they relate to each other (the design) to make them meaningful. Indeed, variants of the word “connect” are often associated with Aru, and the novel is full of moments when she seems to connect the dots in order to make sense (and often, a “story”) of that which surrounds her and is readily available (12, 34, 39, 116, 145).

It thus comes as no surprise when we note that Aru's admirer, Rohit, a young man described as “a practical young man with his feet firmly planted on the ground” does “not conceal his interest in her” (163). His admiration is present and substantive, rather than hinted at or sought after. In a novel filled with the angst of quest and concealment, the demystification of his fascination with Aru is key. Silence again works here as immanent, as presence rather than absence. The narrator describes Rohit as a good listener in terms that echo the opening description of the house, “[h]is silence *acquires solidity and substance*” (125–6; emphasis added). Though Aru does not completely give in to his advances in this novel (they are married in the sequel), his solidity — his presence — makes him an antidote to her absent father, in more ways than one. This solidity is also what makes him sensible, in that he is both able to make sense of that which is around him and that he is easily understood. Finally, the solidity that this novel values is to be found not by plumbing philosophical depths (or psychological ones, for that matter), but by realizing its immanence in the quotidian details and conventions of daily life that make up the social world of the novel.

Part II: Narrative modes

Saikat Majumdar has related this importance of quotidian detail in Deshpande's fiction to the indeterminacy of the novel's genre:

[The] banalities of everyday life, therefore, lie at this amorphous convergence of the composed social realism and the more experimental, fragmented lyricism of internal consciousness that are, in the end, indistinguishable in Deshpande's fiction. In *A Matter of Time*, after Gopal has left his family and Sumi and her three daughters leave their home and come and start living with Sumi's parents, the enormity of the sudden change in their lives is refracted through the minute nuances of everyday physical, domestic life, probably because such verisimilitude is the easiest to admit in the middle of such loss and shock. (2005: 9)

While Majumdar finds that social realism and modernism are fused in the novel's narrative form, I will now show that they are in fact clearly demarcated, confined, as they are, to separate, alternating chapters told by distinct narrators. Their opposition — in their style (realist/modernist), narrative voice (first-/third-person), and even in their content (plot/reflection) — is foregrounded rather than blended, the more modernist, metaphysical one, serving as a foil for the realist, banal, one. Moreover, and *pace* Majumdar, I don't think the novel's verisimilitude is an epistemological easy way out “in the middle of such

loss and shock". Instead, as I will argue towards this essay's end, this verisimilitude provides an alternative structure of meaning, one that is neither universal nor metaphysical but rather communally and continuously constructed through accretion of detail. As Roy (1999: 89) puts it, "the occasionally tedious accumulation of the trivia of a woman's daily life, becomes a mode of exploration of a new area of experience".⁵

Realism

Of the two narrative modes which tell this story, the realist one is dominant in terms of the space it occupies in the novel. Its realism is highly conventional, quotidian in content and concrete and pedestrian in its form. It is plot-conscious and action-driven, and is detail-oriented, placing equal value — and access — on the internal and external world and especially on the (often middle-class) social world that binds them. It features a narrator with a stable, external narrative presence, which presents itself as transparent, even omniscient, and yet occasionally refers to its own narratorial/authorial function and reflects upon it in the manner made famous by George Eliot.

For example, late in the novel, the narrator pauses to reflect on Aru's attempts to make sense: "It is a greater pity perhaps that Aru does not speak openly to her mother about this; because of her silence, she is denied a glimpse of Sumi's vision of Kalyani, so entirely different from Aru's" (184). In this reflection, the narrator performs *and* thematizes the novel's communal social ethos, created not only by the availability (or unavailability) of multiple viewpoints but also of viewpoints *of* viewpoints (Sumi's vision of Kalyani, Aru's vision of Kalyani, the narrator's vision of Aru's various visions, including the ones she lacks). The narrator continues to meditate about her own narratorial/authorial enterprise and technique:

But to [admit knowledge of the future into her narrative] is to admit that Aru is the heroine of this story; only for the heroine can Time be bent backwards.

Is Aru the heroine? Why not? She has youth, one of the necessary requirements of a heroine. And the other — beauty? Well, possibly. The potential is there anyway. (The *Natyashastra* lays down that the heroine should have nobility and steadfastness as well. But we can ignore this. We no longer make such demands on our heroines.) Perhaps there's this too, this above all, that Aru is trying to make sense of what is happening. (185)

This passage engages almost explicitly with Eliot's famous "why always Dorothea?" passage from *Middlemarch* (1847), in which she laments the paucity of a single point of view, even when it is the view of youth and beauty.⁶ Indeed, Aru is not alone in her need to make sense; she shares that with the novel, with the reader implied by the text, and perhaps with the ethos of novelistic realism as a whole. Moreover, what this passage makes clear is that making sense is a common social endeavour — putting the "common" into common sense. The shift to the first-person plural (again echoing Eliot's) — "*We* no longer make such demands on our heroines" — points out not only the commonality which undergirds realism, but also its conventionality. Referring to the *Natyashastra*, a 2000-year-old literary treatise, the narrator emphasizes the fact that literary form is always conventional, that these conventions change over time and place, and

that conventions are rules that are always arrived at — convened — through an explicit or implicit common effort. Through this affiliation with Eliot, Deshpande anchors her artistic enterprise within a powerful realist tradition, one whose form, as Fredric Jameson argues (2013: 225–6), registers “the minute and microscopic negotiation with [...] the Other [...] when relationships take precedence over the beings in relationship, and a registering apparatus is developed which can detect such perpetual changes” and thus insists that the realistic endeavour is common and conventional.⁷

Modernism

However, and in addition to the dominant realist sensibility, *A Matter of Time* also utilizes a distinctly modernist style. Largely manifest in Gopal’s first-person narration, this mode tends to the metaphysical in content and the metaphorical in form; it highlights the introspective, the philosophical and — in a distinctly Faulknerian register — the difficulty of language itself. It is characterized by a stream-of-consciousness narration, associative prose, metaphorical language and complex cultural allusions. It prizes the inner world over the outer, and personal rumination over social interaction. Gopal’s angst thus provides a counterpoint to the realist focus on the social and conventional:

Emptiness, I realized then, is always waiting for us. The nightmare we most dread, of waking up among total strangers, is one we can never escape. And so it is a lie, it means nothing, it’s just deceiving ourselves when we say we are not alone. It is the desperation of a drowning person that makes us cling to other humans. All human ties are only a masquerade. (52)

Once again reverting to the rhetorical structure of depth, Gopal dismisses the social as a sham, a “masquerade”: not only do human ties not alleviate the “nightmare” of “emptiness”, but they in fact weaken us by providing an illusion of comfort that is revealed as a cover for emptiness. The surface is not only not solid or meaningful, but is in active conflict with what Gopal perceives as the real truth which lies in depth. Continuing and intensifying this Faulknerian tone, Sumi’s sister Premi, the character closest to Gopal, speaks of learning to love her own husband:

Yes, Anil too. He had scarcely looked at me before we got engaged, I was only the awkward girl, the daughter of a family friend who spent occasional weekends in their home. And then we got engaged and he played his role of fiancé to the hilt. But to me there was something false in the picture, there was some irritant that hurt me, like a piece of grit in the eye. He said the word “love” often, as if it were a magic word that could convert all the things he did — the phone calls, the gifts, the going out together, the endearments — into something real. (135)

The language of this passage strikingly evokes Addie’s monologue in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930), in which Addie laments the inability of language to access reality or the true essence of things, focusing on the failure of the word “love” when evoked by her husband, Anse (in itself markedly similar to “Anil”):

He had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn’t need a word for that any more than for pride or fear. (1930/2011: 172)

Like Addie, Premi too protests the breach between role (“fiancé”) and genuine feeling, between representation (“picture”) and its meaning, between language (“love”) and the “something real”. The lack is painfully real in both Deshpande and Faulkner, denoting both an emotional inadequacy (the lack of an authentic love) and a formal one (the inability of language to create it).

But in my reading, this high modernist style and sentiment is but a foil to the dominant realist mode which in fact posits a different response to Faulkner’s linguistic aporia. Instead of having the “shape” denote emptiness (“*just a shape to fill a lack*”) Deshpande’s own style points to shape (in the form of the novel’s realism) as a presence, a response to Gopal (and Premi’s) emptiness. Rather than an empty contour, Deshpande’s “shape” comes in the form of the solidity of realistic representation and is thus, unlike Faulkner’s, able to fill a lack. Accordingly, Rosemary George argues that Deshpande’s fiction attempts

to construct women who struggle to “*hold their shape*” outside of the vessels or containers provided by society [...] the longed for ideal self in these narratives is a *unified solid entity* which will not be splintered into fragments by the multiple demands made on these women. (1996: 134; emphasis added)

Solidity then is a *construction*, an ongoing process of formal accretion rather than a reference to an already existing quality.

I would thus like to pursue my reading of *A Matter of Time* as a realist novel, not because I deny its modernist sensibilities, but because I think that exploring Deshpande’s realism in tandem with its formal commitments to presence, to immanence, and to conventionality, leads us to recognize the philosophical claims it has to offer, claims often obscured by more transcendent and modernist readings, such as those offered by Majumdar. And so, while the modernist and realist are found to be in a dialectical relationship, depending on their antagonism to articulate their stakes in reality, I ultimately find Deshpande’s realism — committed to what Jameson has called an “ontological realism” (2013: 211), where what is meaningful and what is existent fully coincide — more compelling, offering, as it does, new ways to rethink the social and the conventional, recharging realism with its social and philosophical value.⁸

Part III: Deshpande’s realism

Like other contemporary works of Indian postcolonial fiction in English, Deshpande’s commitment to realism is largely ignored in the scholarship on her work, even though it constitutes and informs a powerful and persistent realist tradition. Indeed, English-language literary realism has had a contested history in postcolonial India and in its criticism, having largely been overshadowed by a more dominant (post)modernist aesthetics.⁹ Most famously, Salman Rushdie’s deployment of realism — modernist, hybrid, and experimental — came to be celebrated at the expense of more conventional forms of realistic mimesis. In addition, most critiques of postcolonial literature (be they postcolonial or Marxist in inflection) are undergirded by what Eli Park Sorensen (2010: 40), following Rita Felski, calls the “modernist ethos”, a politics of resistance and opposition whose corollary is experimental narrative form, and which tacitly accepts realism as

being a “compromised postcolonial literary form”. More specifically, those that dismiss Deshpande as a middlebrow, unexciting writer also reinforce the commonplaces that view realism as naïve, implausible, simple-minded, middlebrow, or politically dubious,¹⁰ as do those that would rescue her from classification as second-rate, by claiming formal innovation in Deshpande’s work for modernism or postmodernism (Batty 2010: xix–xlii; Majumdar, 2005; Mangwani, 2009: 145).

Yet, Deshpande’s writing is but one of many and varied examples of the ways in which the Indian novel in English has continued to rewrite, rework, and yet ultimately maintain a dominant realist capacity, making an important contribution to the ongoing construction of this tradition in Indian literature. Writing about realism in the Indian novel in the 1930s, Ulka Anjaria (2012: 14) describes “works that are doubly inflected: they represent something in the world, but they are also representing realism itself — its possibilities, its limitations, its complicities, and its subversions”. Deshpande, I argue, continues this double inflection in a markedly different historical, political, gendered, and literary context. She offers realism as a contemporary alternative to the dominant postcolonial aesthetic by foregrounding a communal, rather than referential understanding of realist fiction, bringing the philosophical to bear on the quotidian and the conventional. Rather than rehearsing a narrow understanding that casts realism and complexity as mutually exclusive, her embrace of the mundane and the commonplace situates literary realism as a social, communal endeavour. Deshpande employs the conventions of realist form to construct a contemporary, local, middle-class commonality, whose strength and value accrue and inhere in its common recognition of quotidian details and not in its imagined philosophical foundations. Indeed, the sought-after philosophical foundations are immanent to the commonality which is constituted through its quotidian details.

Invested in modernism as a site of philosophical complexity, Majumdar claims the novel’s realism for modernistic epiphany: “the banal and the everyday are rarely epiphanyzed in Deshpande’s fictions unless one considers the manner in which the staid routine of everyday anchors the heaving, crisis-ridden socio-psychological lives, something magical in its very *concreteness and solidity*” (2005: 12; emphasis added). But his investment in making a claim for modernism obscures what I want to foreground. For Majumdar, the way in which the quotidian — conceived as inherently uninteresting — becomes meaningful is nothing short of “magical”. But if we demystify the “magic” of realism we can trace the ways in which concreteness and solidity are communally constructed through an intricate accretion of social bonds and the quotidian practices that establish them as real. The understanding of reality generated in this novel is not a metaphysical meaning referenced by realist details but a meaning constructed — made concrete and solid — by a commonality that recognizes these quotidian details as real, at the same time as this recognition establishes its commonality.

Indeed, Mrinalini Sebastian (2000: 223) invokes Todorov to explain that the commonplaces of a social group are but the cultural constraints which constitute part of the text’s interpretative systems. She argues that “[i]n Deshpande’s texts that appear to be peculiarly insulated from other cultural elements, the social group whose commonplaces are *recognizable* is the middle-class, liberal, educated, upper-caste community”. While other groups and constraints are represented in the novels, they are understood and made

meaningful through these commonplaces. In this use, “commonplaces” evokes a reified worldview; it is akin to “common sense” in denoting a common practice or meaning that has been solidified into a cliché. However, it is precisely this quality of Deshpande’s realism that enables her intervention in realist form. Deshpande uses commonplaces about realism — and the commonplaces *of* realism, such as quotidian detail — to reanimate this form, to make the ordinary interesting.¹¹ Rather than dismissing these commonplaces as narrow or limiting, we can use Deshpande’s investment in them to see *how meaning is commonly made*. The commonplaces of the social and the conventions of realism thus matter in the same way: because they are the instantiation of a common endeavour, of coming together to make meaning and to *make real*. Rather than being false or insular, commonplaces make apparent the work of the social in constructing the real.

With this in mind, I return to the middlebrow (and its attendant qualities) with which Deshpande’s writing has been faulted, now understood differently. The commonplace and the conventional constitute the reality of what is commonly accepted as real, constitutive, as others have shown, of a contemporary, local, middle-class commonality (Mangwani, 2009: 144). Deshpande’s writing is indeed relentlessly middle — both middle-class and middlebrow — precisely because it is trying to generate a gendered understanding of a class defined and self-defined by its conventions and social structures, its commonplaces. Finally, the novels are middle in yet another way: they focus on the local community: that middle social formation sandwiched between nations (an idea or concern that rarely enters her novels) and the individual. That this middle formation — community — is also central to Eliot’s *Middlemarch* is not beside the point. As we have seen, the reanimation of realism in Deshpande’s work is achieved in part through her explicit engagement with the modernist and the postcolonial but also through a conscious reconsideration of the realist genealogy that she embraces which foregrounds the surface and the social, and as a philosophical rejoinder to the depth of individual angst.¹²

The novel thus places its own search for truth not as a philosophical enterprise, but as a social one. Rather than searching for truths in the autonomous depths of an individual mind, Deshpande seems to locate it in the surface tension of social relations and the details of quotidian reality. In this, the novel provides a compelling model and rationale for the methodology of surface reading advocated, among others, by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009). Note, however, that the surface-over-depth ideal suggested by Deshpande in this novel is not an interpretative methodology (a way of reading), but rather an ontological argument about the location of the real and its meanings. This suggests that Deshpande’s realism does not represent the details of a pre-existing reality, but rather shows how reality is constructed through its details and through its conventions. As I have shown in these readings, the details — and the silences — in Deshpande’s realist fiction do not function as clues to an absent reality, but as reality itself, the reality of what is commonly accepted as real. The reality of a fictional text, as Catherine Gallagher (2006: 335) reminds us in her discussion of fictionality, is a “construct of textual activity”; the text refers to a reality which it is concurrently constructing. This is not to say that we have no access to an extra-linguistic reality but through the mediation of language, but rather that language itself has material qualities that are the stuff of reality itself. This form of realism is the grammar through which “the pose” is made real and

given meaning; it — and not a naive verisimilitude — is at the base of Deshpande's conception of reality. Understanding the way novelistic form functions to create commonalities means rethinking realist form and the legacy of realism in Indian literature. Understanding, rather than dismissing, Deshpande's conventionality is also key to figuring out how it is that in realism — in social structure and mundane detail — that we come together (convene) to make meaning, or, as Gopal would put it, to make life "real".

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Notes

1. Subsequent references are to this 1999 edition and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
2. Accordingly, throughout this essay, I will use "reality" to refer to the actual existence (of experiences and things) which is the referent of the fictional text, and "meaning" to refer to such a reality which is meaningful, as in having purpose of existence. When I later address "the real", I mean the category, concept, or realm of actual existence.
3. This would also be in line with a large part of scholarship on Deshpande which focuses on the gender and feminist politics of the novels and regards the world that is evoked by her novels in the terms presented by Sumi here: social and relational (Jain, 2003; Singh, 2012).
4. I here follow Elaine Freedgood's analysis (2006) of the objects — "things" — that populate the Victorian realist novel, in which she traces a shift from metaphorical meanings to metonymical ones of contiguity. While Freedgood's metonymical searches take her "beyond the covers of the text", Deshpande's metonymies stay resolutely within it, stressing even further textual presence, rather than absence (2006: 5).
5. While Roy describes this experience as a need for recognition as an individual, I argue for its inherent sociality and commonality. Note that it is common not only in that it is ordinary and prevalent but also and especially in that it is shared, or *held in common*.
6. "One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea — but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will get faded, and will know the older and more eating griefs which we are helping to neglect" (Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Book 3, Ch. 29). Indeed, in the novel's sequel *Shadow Play*, Deshpande makes this intertextual connection explicit, "Later, when Mira comes to know Aru, she will try to place her and will think first of Dorothea Brooke" (Deshpande, 2013: 69).
7. For Jameson (2013: 202–3), realism retains the structure of the providential but not its content, replacing individual religiosity with a collective social solidarity.
8. Here too I follow Jameson (2013: 226) who argues that the classification of a text as modernist or realist is ultimately a matter of critical focus. Writing about *Middlemarch* he claims that, "the alternative of modernism and realism does not correspond to a classification system,

but rather to a methodological focus, in such a way that it can scarcely be paradoxical for a ‘great realist’ like George Eliot also, and from another angle, to be identified as a nascent modernist”.

9. Since Edward Said’s assertion (1994: 692) that “the novel, as a cultural artifact of bourgeois society, and imperialism, are unthinkable without each other”, the realist novel has not only been regarded as conservative, authoritarian, or simplistic, but also as complicit in reinforcing an imperialist legacy (Moss, 2000). In her path-breaking *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (1985), Meenakshi Mukherjee has claimed that realism — as it was understood and practised in Europe — was largely unsuccessful in India because the worldview on which it relied and propagated was largely irrelevant to the reality of Indian readers. Building on these observations to trace a more intricate narrative, Priya Joshi (2005: 32) argues that English-language novels were an exception, increasingly drawn towards an accommodation of both English and realistic conventions. Most recently, Anjaria (2012: 2) has shown that the Indian realism of the 1930s, neither naïve nor conservative, deployed this colonial aesthetic to turn colonial logic on its head. For additional discussions of Indian realism see Kanaganayakam (2002); Moss (2000); Paranjape (2000); Trivedi (1986).
10. Much of these commonplaces about realism have originated with modernism’s need to distance itself from its predecessors. The scholarly lacuna created by this dismissal of realism in modern and then postmodern intellectual circles has been starkly laid out by Matthew Beaumont in his “Introduction” to *Adventures in Realism* (2007).
11. In a recent symposium on realism, Harriet Murav (2014) suggested that Victor Schklovsky’s famous essay “Art as Device” which introduced the concept of defamiliarization, was tellingly based largely on readings of Tolstoy, and hence, on realism. Murav thus concludes that realism’s force is not mimetic, but rather the ability to experience the world anew (see also Denner, 2008).
12. Jasbir Jain (2003) expands on Deshpande’s lineage of women realist writers, both Western and Indian.

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