

Escapism and Existential Crisis in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer*

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Abstract- Anita Desai's Where Shall We Go This Summer is a profound psychological novel that explores the complexities of human existence through the inner turmoil of its protagonist, Sita. This paper examines the interrelationship between escapism and existential crisis, arguing that Sita's retreat to Manori Island represents both a psychological response to emotional distress and an existential quest for meaning in an increasingly alienating world. Adopting an interdisciplinary framework that integrates existential philosophy with psychological criticism, the study examines the themes of alienation, identity crisis, loneliness, motherhood, and the search for authenticity. It demonstrates how Sita's inability to reconcile herself with the violence, materialism, and emotional emptiness of urban life compels her to seek refuge in an idealized past. The paper contends that Desai portrays escapism not merely as avoidance of reality but as a complex expression of existential anxiety and the human desire for self-discovery. Ultimately, the novel affirms the enduring struggle to attain meaning, identity, and emotional equilibrium amid the uncertainties of modern existence.

Keywords: *escapism; existential crisis; alienation; identity crisis; psychological conflict; human existence.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Anita Desai (born 24 June 1937) is one of the foremost Indian English novelists, acclaimed for her psychological exploration of human emotions and inner consciousness. Born in Mussoorie, India, to a German mother and a Bengali father, she was educated at the University of Delhi, where she earned a degree in English literature. Desai's fiction is distinguished by its focus on alienation, identity, loneliness, and existential dilemmas, particularly in the lives of women. Her notable works include *Cry, the Peacock*, *Voices in the City*, *Fire on the*

Mountain, *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody*, and *Where Shall We Go This Summer*. She has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times and has received numerous literary honors for her contribution to Indian English literature.

Escapism and Existential Crisis in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer* aptly reflects the central concerns of the novel. It highlights Sita's psychological urge to escape the harsh realities of modern life and examines her existential struggle for identity, meaning, and emotional fulfillment. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of psychological withdrawal and the universal quest for authentic human existence. Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is widely recognized as a significant psychological novel that explores the emotional and intellectual complexities of modern human existence. The novel portrays the inner turmoil of Sita, whose growing dissatisfaction with domestic life and urban civilization compels her to seek refuge on Manori Island. Her decision to withdraw from reality reflects not only a psychological response to emotional distress but also a deeper existential crisis arising from alienation, loneliness, and the search for meaning. Although the novel has been examined from feminist, psychological, and socio-cultural perspectives, the interrelationship between escapism and existential crisis has not received adequate critical attention through an integrated theoretical approach.

The central problem addressed in this study is the need to understand how escapism functions as both a psychological coping mechanism and an existential response to the anxieties of modern life. The research investigates whether Sita's retreat from society

represents mere avoidance of reality or a profound quest for authenticity, identity, and emotional fulfillment. By combining existential philosophy with psychological criticism, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive interpretation of Sita's inner conflict and to demonstrate how Anita Desai presents the universal human struggle for meaning in an increasingly fragmented and alienating world. Anita Desai has long been recognized as one of the most distinguished psychological novelists in Indian English literature. Unlike many of her contemporaries who focused primarily on socio-political realities, Desai turned inward to examine the complexities of human consciousness, emotional isolation, and existential anxiety. Her novels foreground the individual's inner life and explore themes such as alienation, identity, loneliness, and the search for meaning. Among the earliest critics of her fiction, Shyam M. Asnani observes that Desai's fiction "grapples with the intangible realities of life" and "plunges into the innermost depths of the human psyche" (Asnani 44).

Asnani further argues that Desai's major concern is not external action but the psychological disintegration of modern individuals under the pressures of contemporary life. He notes that her fiction highlights "alienation and in communication in marital life," thereby shifting the focus of Indian English fiction from social realism to psychological realism (51). This observation is particularly relevant to *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, where Sita's inner conflict becomes more significant than the external events of the narrative. The following observation by Asnani effectively summarizes Anita Desai's artistic vision:

The fiction of Anita Desai adds a new dimension to Indo-English writing. Turning inward, her fiction grapples with the intangible realities of life, plunges into the innermost depths of the human psyche to fathom its mysteries, the inner turmoil, the chaos inside the mind. (Asnani 44-53)

This assessment establishes Desai as a novelist primarily concerned with psychological experience and provides the foundation for subsequent critical interpretations of *Where Shall We Go This Summer*.

Critical attention to *Where Shall We Go This Summer* has largely centered on the psychological condition of its protagonist, Sita. Early reviewers interpreted the novel as an exploration of prenatal anxiety, emotional isolation, and marital dissatisfaction. A contemporary review described Sita as "a sensitive young wife torn between the desire to abandon the boredom and hypocrisy of her middle-class existence" and her awareness that those ties cannot easily be broken. Such readings identify Sita's withdrawal to Manori Island as an emotional response to the violence and meaninglessness she perceives in modern urban life. A substantial body of criticism approaches the novel from a psychological perspective. Critics generally agree that Sita's retreat to Manori is more than an act of physical escape; it is an attempt to recover emotional security, psychological balance, and an authentic sense of self. Her memories of childhood, emotional loneliness, and inability to adapt to the mechanical routines of metropolitan life are frequently interpreted as the principal causes of her psychological fragmentation. Rather than portraying madness, these studies understand her behavior as the cumulative effect of emotional trauma and prolonged alienation.

Feminist critics have likewise examined the novel as a representation of women's struggle for individuality within a patriarchal social order. They argue that Sita's dissatisfaction is rooted not merely in personal instability but also in the restrictive expectations imposed upon women as wives and mothers. Recent feminist scholarship emphasizes that Desai provides women with an authentic psychological voice by portraying their silence, frustration, marital discord, and search for identity. Md. Firoj Ahmmed, for instance, argues that the novel foregrounds "female individuality" while exposing the psychological distress created by patriarchal structures. Another important area of scholarship concerns symbolism and narrative technique. Critics have drawn attention to Desai's use of stream-of-consciousness narration, interior monologue, memory, and symbolism to represent the complexities of human consciousness. Manori Island has been interpreted as a symbolic landscape where memory, illusion, and reality intersect. Rather than functioning merely as a geographical setting, the island becomes a

psychological sanctuary that reflects Sita's longing for emotional refuge and spiritual renewal. These studies demonstrate that Desai's narrative technique is inseparable from her exploration of psychological experience.

Existential readings of the novel, although comparatively fewer, provide valuable philosophical insights: K. Chellappan argues that *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is fundamentally concerned with the metaphysical relationship between "being and becoming." According to him, the novel is structured through symbolic oppositions such as illusion and reality, island and mainland, sea and sky, all of which dramatize Sita's existential quest. He further observes that the novel explores "basic metaphysical questions" rather than merely social problems. Chellappan's interpretation broadens the understanding of the novel by demonstrating that Sita's journey possesses philosophical significance beyond psychological conflict.

Recent scholarship has expanded these discussions by relating the novel to questions of mental health, emotional isolation, postcolonial identity, and female subjectivity. Contemporary researchers argue that Sita's experiences transcend individual suffering and symbolize the anxieties of modern existence. Her emotional fragmentation is viewed as a reflection of broader concerns regarding identity, belonging, and psychological well-being in post-independence India. Although existing criticism has examined *Where Shall We Go This Summer* from psychological, feminist, symbolic, and existential perspectives, relatively few studies have investigated the interrelationship between escapism and existential crisis through a single interdisciplinary framework. Most scholars emphasize either Sita's psychological withdrawal or her philosophical search for meaning without fully examining how these dimensions inform one another. The present study addresses this gap by integrating existential philosophy with psychological criticism to demonstrate that Sita's retreat to Manori Island represents both a coping mechanism for emotional distress and a profound existential quest for authenticity, identity, and meaning. Such an approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of Anita Desai's

representation of the modern individual's struggle with alienation and human existence.

Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer* has attracted considerable critical attention for its exploration of psychological conflict, feminine consciousness, alienation, and the complexities of modern life. Existing scholarship has predominantly examined the novel from feminist, psychoanalytic, socio-cultural, and psychological perspectives, emphasizing Sita's emotional instability, marital dissatisfaction, motherhood, and her sense of isolation. Other studies have focused on Desai's narrative technique, symbolism, and the portrayal of the inner consciousness of women in postcolonial India.

Despite these valuable contributions, the interrelationship between escapism and existential crisis has not been comprehensively explored through an integrated interdisciplinary framework. Most studies treat Sita's withdrawal to Manori Island either as a psychological reaction to domestic pressures or as a symbolic rejection of patriarchal society. Comparatively little attention has been paid to understanding her retreat as both a psychological coping mechanism and an existential quest for authenticity, meaning, and selfhood. Moreover, the relationship between alienation, existential anxiety, identity crisis, and the search for emotional fulfillment remains insufficiently examined within a unified theoretical perspective.

The present study seeks to bridge this gap by integrating existential philosophy with psychological criticism to investigate how Sita's escapism reflects her struggle with existential anxiety, loneliness, and the search for meaning. By adopting this interdisciplinary approach, the study offers a more comprehensive understanding of Anita Desai's representation of the modern individual's psychological and existential predicament.

The present study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the representation of escapism in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer*.
- To analyse the nature and causes of Sita's existential crisis in the novel.
- To explore the relationship between escapism and existential anxiety as reflected in Sita's psychological experiences.
- To investigate the themes of alienation, loneliness, identity crisis, and motherhood from existential and psychological perspectives.
- To examine the symbolic significance of Manori Island as a space of escape, self-reflection, and existential inquiry.
- To evaluate Anita Desai's portrayal of the modern individual's search for identity, meaning, and authentic existence through an interdisciplinary theoretical framework.

The study adopts an interdisciplinary framework by integrating existential philosophy with psychological criticism. The existential perspective draws upon the philosophical concepts of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus to examine existential anxiety, freedom, alienation, authenticity, absurdity, and the search for meaning. Simultaneously, psychological criticism is employed to analyse Sita's emotional conflicts, identity crisis, maternal anxiety, loneliness, and escapist tendencies. The synthesis of these perspectives enables a comprehensive understanding of the protagonist's psychological condition and existential predicament. The analysis further employs thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to escapism, alienation, motherhood, identity crisis, existential anxiety, and the search for selfhood. Braun and Clarke define thematic analysis as, "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun 79). Their approach is particularly appropriate for literary research because it allows the researcher to interpret recurring ideas, symbols, and psychological experiences embedded within the narrative.

John W. Creswell maintains that qualitative research is fundamentally interpretative and seeks to understand the meanings individuals or texts assign

to particular experiences (Creswell 16). Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln observe that qualitative research, "consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" (Denzin 03). These methodological principles justify the use of close reading and critical interpretation in the present study, where textual evidence is examined through psychological and existential perspectives rather than through quantitative methods. Thus, the study combines close textual reading, thematic analysis, and interdisciplinary theoretical inquiry to demonstrate that Sita's retreat to Manori Island functions not merely as an act of physical escape but as both a psychological coping mechanism and an existential quest for authenticity, identity, and meaningful existence.

The present study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates existential philosophy with psychological criticism to examine the themes of escapism and existential crisis in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer*. This combined approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of Sita's psychological conflicts, alienation, identity crisis, and persistent search for meaning in a fragmented modern world. Existential philosophy provides the conceptual foundation for interpreting the individual's confrontation with freedom, responsibility, anxiety, absurdity, and authenticity. Jean-Paul Sartre asserts that "existence precedes essence," emphasizing that human beings create their identities through their choices and actions (Sartre 22). This existential principle is particularly relevant to Sita, whose struggle reflects an ongoing attempt to define her existence amid emotional isolation and social conformity. The study also draws upon the existential insights of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Albert Camus. Kierkegaard's concept of anxiety as an inevitable consequence of human freedom, Heidegger's notion of authentic existence, and Camus's philosophy of the absurd collectively provide a philosophical framework for analyzing Sita's emotional unrest and her desire to escape an increasingly meaningless world. As Camus observes, "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 28).

Sita's dissatisfaction with domestic routine, materialism, and emotional emptiness reflects this existential confrontation, making her retreat to Manori Island an attempt to seek authenticity rather than merely a rejection of reality. Alongside existential philosophy, the study employs psychological criticism to examine Sita's emotional conflicts and escapist tendencies. Psychological concepts such as alienation, loneliness, defense mechanisms, and identity formation provide valuable insights into her withdrawal from urban life and her inability to establish meaningful interpersonal relationships. Erik H. Erikson defines identity as “a process located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture” (Erikson 22). Sita's growing sense of estrangement illustrates the breakdown of this balance between the individual and society, leading to an intense identity crisis and emotional fragmentation. The integration of existential philosophy with psychological criticism enables a multidimensional interpretation of the novel. Rather than viewing escapism merely as an act of avoidance, this interdisciplinary framework interprets it as both a psychological coping mechanism and an existential response to alienation, anxiety, and the search for authentic existence. Consequently, the study argues that Sita's journey to Manori Island symbolizes not only her rejection of an emotionally barren social order but also her enduring quest for identity, self-understanding, and meaningful human existence.

Escapism functions as the central psychological and existential motif in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, shaping both the narrative structure and the psychological development of its protagonist, Sita. Rather than presenting escapism as mere avoidance of reality, Desai portrays it as a complex response to emotional alienation, existential anxiety, and the individual's search for authenticity. Sita's decision to leave Bombay for Manori Island symbolizes an inward journey motivated by her inability to reconcile her with the violence, materialism, and emotional sterility of modern urban life. Her withdrawal therefore represents both a psychological defense mechanism and an existential attempt to recover meaning in a world that appears fragmented and spiritually barren.

Existential philosophy provides an appropriate framework for understanding Sita's predicament. Jean-Paul Sartre argues that human existence is characterized by freedom, responsibility, and the burden of choice. This principle suggests that individuals are not born with predetermined identities but must create meaning through their own decisions. Sita, however, experiences this freedom not as liberation but as anxiety. Unable to identify with the social roles assigned to her as a wife and mother, she finds herself trapped between personal authenticity and social expectation. Her journey to Manori Island reflects an attempt to redefine her existence beyond the constraints imposed by domestic routine and middle-class conformity.

Sita's desire to escape originates from her profound dissatisfaction with the values governing the society around her. Bombay is portrayed not simply as a physical city but as a metaphor for modern civilization—mechanical, materialistic, and emotionally indifferent. Everyday existence appears repetitive and spiritually empty, depriving individuals of meaningful human relationships. Albert Camus explains that, “the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus 28). Sita's emotional condition illustrates this existential absurdity. She longs for emotional fulfillments and authentic communication, yet encounters only indifference, routine, and isolation. Consequently, her withdrawal is not irrational escapism but a philosophical response to a world incapable of satisfying her deepest emotional needs. From a psychological perspective, Sita's behavior may also be understood as an attempt to restore emotional equilibrium. Psychological criticism emphasizes that individuals frequently seek symbolic spaces capable of reducing anxiety during periods of emotional crisis. In Sita's case, Manori Island represents such a symbolic refuge. It is remembered not merely as a geographical location but as a realm associated with childhood innocence, emotional security, and spiritual harmony. Her memories transform the island into an idealized landscape where the pressures of modern existence appear suspended. Rather than confronting the present, Sita unconsciously reconstructs the past as a source of psychological protection.

Memory therefore becomes an essential mechanism of escapism. Desai illustrates how nostalgic recollection reshapes reality according to emotional need rather than historical truth. Sita remembers Manori selectively, emphasizing its tranquility and mysterious atmosphere while overlooking its imperfections. Her recollections reveal more about her psychological condition than about the island itself. In this respect, the past functions as an imaginative construct through which she attempts to recover emotional stability. The island becomes less a real destination than a projection of her desire for security, belonging, and inner peace. Sita's crisis emerges precisely because the relationship between the individual and society has disintegrated. She no longer identifies with the social environment surrounding her, nor does she possess a stable sense of self independent of it. Her retreat to Manori Island therefore signifies not only physical withdrawal but also an unconscious attempt to reconstruct an identity that modern life has fragmented. Her recollections of childhood transform the island into an imagined space of innocence, emotional security, and belonging. By idealizing her father's enigmatic presence and the seemingly harmonious atmosphere of Manori, Sita associates the island with a period before the emotional alienation of adulthood. These memories function less as objective recollections than as psychological projections of her desire for wholeness and stability. Consequently, the island symbolizes a lost self that she hopes to recover, illustrating how memory becomes a means of negotiating identity during periods of existential crisis. Thus, the opening phase of Sita's journey demonstrates that escapism is inseparable from existential anxiety. Desai presents withdrawal neither as weakness nor as simple fantasy but as a profound psychological response to alienation and the collapse of personal meaning. By linking memory, identity, and emotional insecurity, the novel suggests that the human desire to escape often arises from an intense longing for authenticity and self-understanding rather than from an unwillingness to confront reality.

Alienation constitutes one of the central concerns in Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, functioning as the psychological foundation of Sita's existential crisis. Desai presents alienation not merely

as physical or social isolation but as a profound rupture between the individual and the surrounding world. Sita's estrangement extends beyond her family and society to encompass her own fragmented consciousness. Although she inhabits a conventional middle-class household, she experiences an overwhelming sense of emotional emptiness that prevents her from establishing meaningful human relationships. Her inability to articulate her fears, anxieties, and dissatisfaction creates an invisible psychological barrier between herself and those around her, transforming the family into a space of emotional silence rather than mutual understanding. Through Sita's experiences, Desai suggests that modern civilization, despite its emphasis on social organization and domestic stability, frequently intensifies loneliness and emotional fragmentation.

Existential philosophy provides a valuable framework for interpreting this condition. Martin Heidegger argues that authentic existence becomes possible only when individuals confront their own being rather than conform unquestioningly to social expectations. Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre maintains that human beings are "condemned to be free," implying that every individual bears the responsibility of creating meaning despite uncertainty and isolation (Sartre 29). Sita's suffering reflects precisely this existential burden. She is unable to accept the conventional definitions of wifehood and motherhood imposed by society, yet she has not discovered an alternative identity capable of providing psychological stability or existential fulfillments. Sita's alienation becomes most evident in her relationship with Raman, whose practical outlook sharply contrasts with her emotional and philosophical temperament. Raman accepts the routines of domestic life with calm rationality and believes that responsibility requires adaptation to reality. Sita, however, perceives such acceptance as emotional indifference. Their marriage therefore represents more than a conflict of personalities; it symbolizes the failure of communication that frequently characterizes modern relationships. Raman evaluates experience through logic, whereas Sita responds through intuition and emotional sensitivity. Their inability to understand each other's perspectives deepens Sita's psychological isolation and reinforces

her conviction that her existential struggles cannot be shared or adequately explained. The emotional distance separating husband and wife also illustrates the existential concept of human solitude. Albert Camus observes that the absurd arises from the conflict between humanity's desire for meaning and the world's silence (Camus 28). Sita repeatedly attempts to find emotional understanding within her domestic environment but encounters misunderstanding rather than genuine communication. Consequently, her alienation is not simply marital dissatisfaction; it reflects the universal human experience of confronting an indifferent reality that fails to satisfy emotional and spiritual needs.

The experience of alienation gradually develops into an acute identity crisis. Sita becomes increasingly incapable of defining herself through the conventional roles assigned by society. Although she fulfills the responsibilities expected of a wife and mother, these roles fail to satisfy her deeper intellectual and emotional aspirations. She begins to question not only her place within the family but also the very purpose of her existence. Sita's crisis emerges because this essential relationship between the individual and society has broken down. She no longer identifies with the social environment surrounding her, nor does she possess a secure inner identity independent of it. Her psychological fragmentation therefore reflects the collapse of both personal certainty and social belonging.

Desai portrays identity not as a fixed social category but as a continuous process of self-discovery. Sita's struggle demonstrates that authentic identity cannot be attained merely by fulfilling socially prescribed roles. Instead, genuine selfhood requires self-awareness, emotional honesty, and the courage to confront existential uncertainty. Her journey to Manori Island therefore represents not only physical escape but also an attempt to recover an authentic self-obscured by years of conformity, emotional repression, and psychological exhaustion. Motherhood occupies a crucial position within this crisis of identity. Unlike traditional literary representations that celebrate motherhood as the ultimate fulfillments of feminine identity, Desai

presents pregnancy as a complex psychological and existential experience. Sita's fifth pregnancy intensifies her anxiety because she cannot bear the thought of introducing another innocent life into a world she perceives as violent, fragmented, and emotionally barren. Her reluctance to give birth should not be interpreted as a rejection of motherhood itself but as an expression of profound existential responsibility. She fears that her child will inherit the same alienation, loneliness, and meaninglessness that dominate her own existence.

Viktor E. Frankl argues that human beings are fundamentally motivated by the "will to meaning," and psychological suffering becomes unbearable only when life appears devoid of purpose (Frankl 105). Sita's maternal anxiety reflects precisely this search for meaning. She questions whether it is morally justifiable to bring new life into a world that seems incapable of providing emotional security or spiritual fulfillments. Pregnancy thus becomes more than a biological condition; it symbolizes the continuity of human existence and the ethical responsibility associated with that continuity.

Memory further complicates Sita's identity crisis. Her return to Manori Island is motivated not only by the desire to escape but also by the hope of recovering an earlier, more authentic self-associated with childhood. The island functions as a symbolic landscape where memory, imagination, and identity converge. However, Sita gradually realizes that neither memory nor place can restore the past. Time has transformed both the island and herself, making any return to childhood impossible. This realization constitutes a decisive moment in her existential development. Identity cannot be recovered through nostalgia because authenticity must be created within the realities of the present rather than rediscovered in idealized memories.

Desai presents alienation, identity crisis, and motherhood as interconnected dimensions of the modern human condition. Sita's emotional isolation generates questions about identity, while her experience of motherhood intensifies her awareness of existential responsibility. Rather than offering simplistic solutions, the novel portrays these

experiences as inevitable aspects of human existence. Through Sita's psychological journey, Desai demonstrates that the search for identity is inseparable from the search for meaning and that authentic existence requires individuals to confront, rather than evade, the uncertainties, responsibilities, and emotional complexities of life. Anita Desai transforms the island into a symbolic space that embodies hope, memory, illusion, and self-discovery. Throughout the novel, Manori represents Sita's longing for a world free from violence, emotional emptiness, and the oppressive routines of urban life. Her journey to the island is therefore both physical and metaphysical, reflecting the individual's enduring desire to transcend suffering and rediscover meaning. At the beginning of the novel, Sita imagines Manori as a sanctuary capable of protecting her from the harsh realities of civilization. Her childhood memories of the island are closely associated with her charismatic father, whose mysterious personality and unconventional lifestyle created an atmosphere of wonder and spiritual possibility. These memories encourage Sita to believe that the island possesses extraordinary powers capable of suspending the ordinary laws of nature. Her hope that childbirth can be prevented on the island symbolizes her attempt to resist the inevitability of human suffering. The island thus becomes a projection of her psychological needs rather than an objective reality. Nature occupies a crucial place in Desai's symbolic structure. While the city represents materialism, routine, and emotional alienation, the island appears to offer tranquility and introspection. This opposition between the city and the island reflects Sita's divided consciousness. The external landscape mirrors her internal state, illustrating how physical environments can symbolize emotional experiences. Desai's descriptive language emphasizes this relationship between nature and consciousness, suggesting that the natural world provides temporary relief from psychological tension without permanently resolving existential conflict. However, as Sita spends more time on Manori, the distinction between memory and reality gradually becomes apparent. The island she encounters is not identical to the idealized place preserved in her imagination. The magical atmosphere associated with her childhood has diminished, and the people living there are governed by ordinary human concerns

rather than miraculous powers. This realization marks a significant turning point in Sita's psychological journey. She begins to understand that the refuge she sought exists primarily within her memory and imagination. Desai thereby challenges the illusion that external places alone can provide lasting emotional fulfillments.

The symbolic collapse of Sita's illusion is essential to the novel's existential message. Her disappointment does not signify failure but rather the beginning of self-awareness. She recognizes that her fears, anxieties, and emotional conflicts cannot be eliminated simply by changing locations. Existential suffering originates within human consciousness and therefore requires inward transformation rather than geographical escape. This realization aligns with the central principles of existential philosophy, which maintain that individuals must confront uncertainty instead of avoiding it. Sita's journey demonstrates that authenticity is achieved through acceptance of life's complexities rather than through withdrawal from them. Another significant symbol in the novel is pregnancy itself. Initially, Sita views her unborn child as a burden because she fears exposing another innocent life to violence and despair. As her understanding evolves, pregnancy comes to symbolize continuity, responsibility, and the inevitability of human existence. By accepting the birth of her child, Sita gradually moves from resistance toward acceptance. This transformation does not imply that all her anxieties disappear; instead, it indicates a greater willingness to face reality despite its uncertainties. Desai thus portrays acceptance not as resignation but as an act of emotional maturity and existential courage.

The conclusion of the novel avoids simplistic optimism. Desai does not suggest that Sita achieves complete psychological harmony or permanent happiness. Instead, she presents her development as an ongoing process of self-understanding. The return from Manori symbolizes not defeat but renewed awareness. Sita realizes that meaning cannot be discovered in miraculous places or idealized memories; it must be created through conscious engagement with life, relationships, and personal responsibility. This insight reflects the existential

belief that human beings must construct significance within an imperfect and uncertain world. *Where Shall We Go This Summer* presents escapism as an important yet limited response to existential crisis. Through the symbolism of Manori Island, Anita Desai illustrates both the necessity and the inadequacy of psychological escape. The novel argues that while withdrawal may offer temporary emotional relief, lasting fulfillments depends upon self-awareness, acceptance, and the courage to confront reality. Sita's journey from alienation to partial self-recognition transforms the novel into a profound meditation on human existence, demonstrating that the search for meaning is neither a destination nor a miracle but a continuous process of personal growth and existential affirmation.

The textual analysis demonstrates that Sita's escape to Manori Island is not merely an act of physical withdrawal but a symbolic response to profound psychological and existential conflict. Desai portrays escapism as a coping mechanism rooted in alienation, identity crisis, and maternal anxiety rather than as simple avoidance of responsibility. The novel reveals that external escape cannot resolve inner turmoil, as existential suffering originates within human consciousness. Through the symbolism of Manori Island, Desai emphasizes that authentic existence requires self-awareness, acceptance, and engagement with reality. Consequently, *Where Shall We Go This Summer* emerges as a significant psychological novel that explores the universal human quest for identity, meaning, and emotional equilibrium in the face of modern life's uncertainties.

The study concludes that Anita Desai's *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is a compelling exploration of escapism and existential crisis through the character of Sita. Her journey reflects the psychological consequences of alienation, loneliness, and the search for identity in a fragmented modern world. While Manori Island initially appears to offer an escape from reality, it ultimately reveals that genuine fulfillments cannot be attained through physical withdrawal alone. Desai suggests that meaning emerges through self-understanding, acceptance, and the courage to confront life's uncertainties. By integrating psychological insight with existential

concerns, the novel offers a profound reflection on the complexities of human existence and affirms Anita Desai's enduring contribution to modern Indian English fiction.

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