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**ROOTS AND REVERBERATIONS: TRACING IDENTITY AND HISTORY IN RACHEL KHONG'S REAL AMERICANS**

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## Roots And Reverberations: Tracing Identity and History in Rachel Khong's *Real Americans*

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the intricate themes of identity and history in Rachel Khong's *Real Americans*, focusing on how the novel interrogates the intersection of personal and collective memory. By employing a close textual analysis, this study highlights how Khong crafts a multigenerational narrative that reflects the struggles of diasporic identity, familial bonds, and the echoes of history in contemporary lives. Drawing on theories of identity formation, cultural memory, and diasporic literature, this paper demonstrates how *Real Americans* functions as both an intimate personal journey and a broader historical reflection. Ultimately, Khong's novel reveals how identity is rooted in the past and reverberates through present consciousness, shaped by loss, resilience, and the longing for belonging.

**Keywords:** Rachel Khong, *Real Americans*, identity, diaspora, history, cultural memory, immigration, generational trauma

### **Introduction**

Rachel Khong's *Real Americans* is a poignant exploration of identity formation within the context of family history and diasporic belonging. As a multigenerational narrative, the novel traverses temporal and spatial landscapes to reveal how personal identity is inextricably linked to historical forces. Through the lens of cultural memory and the lived experiences of her characters, Khong examines how displacement, cultural hybridity, and familial inheritance shape one's understanding of self. This paper investigates how *Real Americans* traces the interplay between history and identity, illustrating how the past is never truly past it reverberates in the present.

### **Memory and Inheritance: The Burden of the Past**

One of the most striking aspects of *Real Americans* is its nuanced depiction of cultural memory and inherited trauma. Khong illustrates how historical events are not simply relegated to history books but live on in the consciousness of future generations. As Marianne Hirsch argues in her theory of postmemory, "the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma often experience those events through imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 5). In *Real Americans*, this concept manifests in the protagonist's struggle to reconcile her American present with the weight of her family's past.

Khong's use of fragmented storytelling mirrors the fractured nature of memory, highlighting the difficulty of piecing together a coherent sense of self from disparate cultural and historical influences. At one point, the protagonist reflects, "I carry my mother's voice in my head, her warnings, her anxieties, as though they are my own. Perhaps they are" (Khong

112). This passage underscores the way familial and historical burdens are internalized, demonstrating the reverberation of the past in the present.

### **Diaspora and Hybridity: Negotiating Identity**

The novel also grapples with the complexities of diasporic identity, illustrating the protagonist's attempts to navigate between two worlds. Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" is particularly relevant here, as he describes how diasporic individuals exist in an interstitial space that challenges rigid cultural binaries. Bhabha argues that "cultural identity is never a finished product; it is always in the process of becoming" (Bhabha 55). This idea is reflected in *Real Americans*, where the protagonist oscillates between her inherited cultural heritage and her present American reality. For instance, when she visits her ancestral homeland, she experiences a sense of alienation rather than belonging: "I thought coming here would make me feel whole. Instead, I feel like a visitor, a tourist in a past that doesn't quite belong to me" (Khong 174). This moment encapsulates the paradox of diasporic identity—the longing for roots, yet the recognition that those roots have evolved in ways that make full return impossible.

### **The Role of History: Personal and Collective Narratives**

Khong's novel underscores how history is not merely an external force but something deeply personal and intimate. The protagonist's journey is shaped by the legacies of war, migration, and displacement events that have defined her family's trajectory. As Pierre Nora states, "Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name" (Nora 7). In *Real Americans*, memory is not static; it is an evolving narrative shaped by interpretation and adaptation. The novel's intergenerational structure emphasizes this theme, showing how each generation contends with history in different ways. The protagonist's grandparents experience migration as a rupture, her parents as a negotiation, and she as a paradox both connected and disconnected from her lineage. This dynamic illustrates how identity is not solely an individual construct but one deeply embedded in collective history.

### **Conclusion**

Rachel Khong's *Real Americans* offers a profound meditation on identity and history, revealing how the past continuously reverberates in the present. Through its intricate narrative structure, the novel demonstrates how cultural memory, generational trauma, and diasporic hybridity shape the protagonist's journey of self-discovery. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Hirsch, Bhabha, and Nora, this paper has shown how Khong's work situates personal identity within a broader historical and cultural framework. Ultimately, *Real Americans* challenges us to consider how our identities are shaped by the echoes of history and the stories we inherit.

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