

Original Paper

Narratives of Rebirth and Resistance: Exploring Identity, Redemption, and Cultural Critique in Female-Targeted Rebirth Literature

Zhou Ya¹, Deng Yan¹, & Guanbao Liu^{1*}

¹ Shanghai Lida University, Shanghai 201609, China

* Guanbao Liu, Shanghai Lida University, Shanghai 201609, China

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Abstract

Rebirth narratives, as a unique literary phenomenon, have recently garnered significant attention in literary studies both domestically and internationally. Through protagonists' rebirth experiences, these novels explore themes of identity reconstruction and life re-exploration, conveying profound reflections on the meaning of life and aspirations for the future. Compared to their male-targeted counterparts, female-centric rebirth novels tend to defy stereotypes, challenging gendered identities and conventional perceptions. By employing varied temporal, thematic, and character constructs, these works collectively advance the transformation of narrative structures. This paper aims to investigate the themes and narrative strategies of female-centric rebirth novels, analyzing how dual-layered narrative structures, diversified plot types, and resistance to mainstream culture profoundly express themes of identity reconstruction and life re-exploration.

Keywords

rebirth, narrative, women

I. Current State of Research: Domestic and International Perspectives

Research on identity reconstruction and life re-exploration within rebirth narrative frameworks has developed along several notable trends both internationally and domestically. Scholars are increasingly adopting an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates theories and methodologies from literary studies, psychology, and sociology to analyze rebirth narratives from a range of perspectives. This cross-disciplinary integration allows for a comprehensive understanding of rebirth as a cultural and psychological phenomenon, enriching the narrative's interpretative depth (Chen, 2024; Hu, 2021).

In addition to thematic exploration, there is growing scholarly attention to the cultural logic and social critique embedded within rebirth narratives, with researchers investigating how these narratives reflect and critique specific social phenomena of contemporary society. For instance, Zhu (2024) suggests that the rebirth theme in contemporary online romance fiction often employs two parallel narrative lines, where characters' past and present lives mirror and subvert one another, forming a distinctive life cycle. This structure combines entertainment with intellectual depth by drawing on elements from folklore to create a "second life" through the dynamic interplay of life and death, fulfilling readers' desire for an immersive existential experience. Zhu's analysis highlights how this exploration of a "second life" resonates with modern aspirations for varied modes of existence and an inquiry into the value of life itself.

As narratology evolves, there is a growing focus on innovations in narrative strategy within rebirth novels, particularly the use of non-linear storytelling and multi-perspective narration. Xiao (2021) observes that many online rebirth novels feature a dual-layered narrative structure that includes both superficial and profound layers. In these stories, memories from the first life often aid the protagonist in shaping decisions in the second, creating a unique interplay between past knowledge and present choices. However, the deeper layer embodies the duality of known and unknown, where the second life remains filled with uncertainties despite past recollections. This dual-layered structure enhances the narrative's compensatory function, allowing a profound exploration of life's regrets, the limits of self-understanding, and an aesthetic reflection on the meaning and value of life.

II. Thematic Analysis of Rebirth Narratives

In rebirth novels, protagonists frequently undergo a process of identity reconstruction after experiencing rebirth. This reconstruction encompasses not only material changes, such as shifts in social status and financial circumstances, but also profound transformations in personality and values. In redemption-oriented rebirth novels, for instance, protagonists often seek to amend past regrets, achieve self-redemption, and reconstruct their identities. In *The Rebirth of the General's Poisonous Daughter*, the protagonist Shen Miao suffers betrayal and abuse in her previous life. Following her rebirth, she not only takes preventive measures but also retaliates with resilience, underscoring how rebirth enables her to address past wrongs and reshape her identity. Another example is *Beaten to Death and Reborn, I Abused My Entire Family*, where Su An, previously meek and kind-hearted, is sold into an abusive marriage by her father and stepmother. Her rebirth grants her the courage to stand up to her family, reject unfair treatment, and alter her destiny. Through this newfound assertiveness, she escapes her oppressive circumstances, rebuilds her life, and initiates a new beginning after divorce by leveraging her prior experiences.

Beyond identity reconstruction, rebirth novels delve deeply into life re-exploration. Protagonists use the foreknowledge they retain to avoid previous mistakes and forge completely different life trajectories. This re-exploration is evident not only in choices related to life paths but also in profound reflections on life's value and meaning. In *The 1980s Mother is the Villainess*, the female protagonist, reborn as a villainous character, strives to avert past tragedies by compensating the male lead. Through her transformation and acts of reconciliation, the novel explores the complexities of human nature and personal growth. Similarly, *The Rebirth of a Married Couple* depicts both protagonists working together after being reborn to strive for familial happiness and love, illustrating how they confront challenges, overcome previous regrets, and collaboratively navigate a renewed life. *The Devil's Temperature* follows Bei Yao, who dedicates her rebirth to saving Pei Chuan, ultimately achieving not only his salvation but also her own spiritual redemption and inner rebirth.

III. Narrative Strategies in Rebirth Narratives

Rebirth novels targeted at female audiences often employ a dual-layered narrative structure, enhancing the story's richness and complexity while also intensifying readers' engagement. This narrative approach, recognized in narratology, integrates two or more interwoven narrative levels that influence each other. In female-centric rebirth novels, this structure commonly manifests as an intertwining of the protagonist's past life (or first life) and present life (or second life).

The superficial layer serves as a contrast between the two lives. In many rebirth novels, the protagonist's previous life is marred by regret, pain, or failure, whereas the present life offers a fresh start. For example, *Beaten to Death and Reborn, I Abused My Entire Family* showcases this contrast vividly. In her past life, the protagonist Su An is submissive and silent in the face of injustice, yet after her rebirth, she transforms into a bold and assertive figure. She bravely stands up to her family, parts ways with toxic relationships, and embarks on a new life journey. By contrasting choices and outcomes across these two lives, the novel emphasizes the diversity and possibilities of life, highlighting the protagonist's growth and change after rebirth.

At a deeper level, the dual structure reflects the tension between the known and the unknown. Although the protagonist retains memories of a past life, the new life still harbors unpredictability and uncertainty. This duality deepens the narrative, amplifying the novel's appeal while also delving into existential themes like human fallibility, self-awareness limits, and life's inherent worth. Through this layered structure, rebirth novels fulfill both an entertaining and compensatory role in literature, allowing readers to explore missed opportunities and new beginnings.

Additionally, rebirth novels employ a narrative strategy known as "branching pathways." Here, protagonists often face life-altering choices that diverge significantly from those of their past lives, creating unique destinies. For instance, in *The Apocalypse Expert Travels Back to the 1950s*, the

protagonist Xia Yanru, a survivor of the apocalypse, travels back to the 1950s and uses her intelligence and unique abilities to create an impressive new life in a resource-scarce environment. Similarly, in *The Spoiled Girl Reborn in the Age of Literature*, Han Dynasty Empress Chen Ajiao is reborn as a village girl in the 1970s. Rather than acting spoiled and entitled, she adjusts to her new identity and pursues happiness through adaptation. By portraying distinct fates resulting from different choices, these novels explore the complexities of life, stressing how past experiences inform wiser choices in the reborn characters' quests for redemption and growth.

Female-oriented rebirth novels exhibit a diversity of plot types, including revenge narratives, palace intrigue, empowerment arcs, sweet romance, business entrepreneurship, and science fiction fantasy. These varied plots not only enrich the content of rebirth novels but also demonstrate the protagonists' different paths and experiences in identity reconstruction and life re-exploration.

Revenge-driven rebirth novels typically revolve around past injustices and betrayals suffered by the protagonist, who, reborn, seeks vengeance with passion and strategy. These novels are often fast-paced and suspenseful, providing readers with a sense of catharsis and emotional engagement. For example, in *Spring Banquet*, Princess Li Huaiyu is poisoned but returns as a commoner determined to outwit her enemies. Similarly, *After Rebirth, I Became a Face-Slapping Protagonist* follows a protagonist who uses her talents to avenge past humiliations, earning her a formidable reputation.

Palace intrigue is another popular subgenre, featuring protagonists of noble birth navigating complex familial and political conflicts. *The Story of Minglan*, for instance, follows a young woman who matures within a feuding noble family, eventually securing a prominent position. Another example, *Phoenix in Captivity*, centers on Princess Liu Chuyu, a woman with modern sensibilities reborn in ancient China. Through these narratives, the novels explore themes of resilience, intelligence, and social critique.

Growth-centered rebirth novels depict protagonists overcoming challenges to achieve personal growth. In *Fat Campus Belle*, the protagonist is mocked for her weight but uses her rebirth as a chance to transform her life and achieve her dreams. Similarly, *The Genius Physician and Wastrel Consort* follows a protagonist who overcomes limitations with her skills and resilience, blending elements of adventure and self-empowerment.

Sweet romance rebirth novels emphasize emotional development and romantic dynamics, often infusing the narrative with warmth and nostalgia. *The Splendid Marriage of the 1980s* tells the story of a woman who returns to a crucial turning point in her life, determined to achieve both love and success. With historical backdrops, these novels blend romance and life exploration, highlighting personal empowerment. Another example, *Reborn Space Wife*, follows a protagonist navigating life and love in the 1980s, using magical space elements to add a unique twist to her journey.

Entrepreneurship-focused rebirth novels emphasize ambition and financial independence, where protagonists leverage past experiences to succeed in business. *Rebirth as a Financial Mogul* describes a woman using future insights to navigate the 2014 financial market, ultimately creating an empire. Likewise, in *After Kicking Out My Scumbag Husband, I Achieved Financial Freedom*, the protagonist defies patriarchal constraints to build a flourishing career, embodying the novel's feminist message.

Lastly, science fiction rebirth novels combine speculative elements with rebirth, presenting a vibrant world of superpowers and futuristic adventures. In *Return to the Apocalypse*, the protagonist prepares for an impending apocalypse, using foreknowledge to ensure her family's survival. Similarly, in *She Reborn and Became a Killer in the Apocalypse*, a woman reborn with special abilities carves out a powerful role in a post-apocalyptic world.

Beyond narrative diversity, rebirth novels also embody resistance to mainstream cultural norms. This defiance manifests as a rejection of traditional values, a challenge to patriarchal authority, and a subversion of literary conventions. These novels provide readers with fresh perspectives that encourage reflection on and critique of dominant social values.

A common form of resistance is the rejection of traditional values such as forgiveness and self-sacrifice. In classical literature, protagonists often respond to harm with kindness, but in rebirth novels, the protagonist's past suffering often results in a more assertive stance, valuing self-empowerment over passive endurance. For instance, in *The Rebirth of the General's Poisonous Daughter*, the protagonist Shen Miao, betrayed in her previous life, actively seeks revenge upon rebirth. This principle of "repaying kindness and avenging betrayal" signifies a departure from traditional values of tolerance and patience.

Rebirth novels also challenge the patriarchal structures that have traditionally dictated social order. In *The Malicious Daughter*, Li Weiyang, originally a powerless illegitimate child, uses her rebirth to claim agency, dismantling family power structures and asserting her place. Her journey to prominence critiques the established gender norms, offering an empowering model for readers.

Finally, rebirth novels subvert traditional literary norms by adopting a lighter, more relatable tone, distinguishing them from the gravitas of conventional literature. Through humor and accessible language, novels like *The Strongest Empress* redefine rebirth tropes, prioritizing wit and resilience over vengeance. *The Urban Cultivation of Rebirth* uses popular vernacular to attract younger readers, adding vibrancy to the rebirth genre and modernizing its appeal.

These various dimensions of cultural resistance illustrate the genre's significance to its readers, particularly women, by addressing psychological and aesthetic needs while advancing the genre's evolution in the literary landscape. However, some rebirth novels may include themes of excessive violence or moral ambiguity, which could potentially impact readers' perceptions.

IV. Conclusion

Contemporary female-oriented rebirth novels, through their unique narrative frameworks, illustrate the protagonists' journeys of identity reconstruction and life re-exploration, highlighting various emotional and experiential facets of these transformations. By employing a dual-layered narrative structure, a diverse array of plot types, and a countercultural stance, rebirth novels fulfill readers' desires to address life's regrets while expressing profound reflections on alternate life paths. These novels not only offer readers an enriching literary experience but also hold distinctive value and significance within the broader literary landscape.

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