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Breast Cancer in Malaysia: From Faith to Fragmented Stories Through Franks' Narrative Illness Framework

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Abstract

Illness narratives provide valuable insight into how individuals interpret and make meaning of their disease experiences. Arthur Frank's typology of restitution, chaos, and quest narratives offers a valuable framework for understanding the emotional, cultural, and existential dimensions of illness. This study applies Frank's typology to explore how Malaysian women with breast cancer construct their illness stories, with particular attention to the influence of cultural, social, and spiritual factors. Three participants were purposively selected from a larger cohort of 14 Malaysian women diagnosed with breast cancer. Unstructured, in-depth interviews were conducted, allowing participants to recount their experiences in their own words. Data were analysed using Riessman's narrative analysis, focusing on the structure, content, and imagery of the narratives to uncover meaning-making processes. One participant's account reflected a restitution narrative centred on recovery; another exhibited emotional disorientation characteristic of a chaos narrative; and the third

embraced a quest narrative, viewing illness as a transformative journey. The narratives were shaped by interwoven cultural values, religious beliefs, and social expectations, revealing how these dimensions influence women's interpretations of and responses to illness. The findings also demonstrated that narrative types are not fixed; participants frequently shifted between forms within a single account, reflecting the fluid nature of lived experience. In conclusion, Frank's typology offers a culturally sensitive lens for capturing the complex, contextually embedded experiences of Malaysian women with breast cancer. Riessman's narrative analysis further highlights the dynamic and overlapping qualities of illness narratives. These insights have implications for the development of culturally responsive psychosocial care and for advancing understanding of illness meaning-making in non-Western contexts. © 2026, Qualitative Research Association of Malaysia (QRAM). All rights reserved.

Author keywords

Chaos; Frank's typology; illness narratives; quest; restitution

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