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## Reimagining Boundaries: The Body as a Contested Geospace in Suleika Jaoud's *Between Two Kingdoms*

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### Abstract

This paper would explore how a chronic illness like leukemia overpowers Suleika Jaoud's body. The transformation caused by chemotherapy turns her body into a contested geospatial terrain that becomes a site of physical and emotional struggle. She feels alienated from the social spaces which were once familiar. Her cancer diagnosis alters her relationship to the physical spaces like home, hospital and workspace. The research question is how a chronically ill person's body becomes a contested geospace in Suleika Jaoud's memoir, *Between Two Kingdoms*? The hypothesis: The identity of an individual is reconfigured in response to the physical and emotional transformation brought by an illness. The present paper is an analytical study. Principally, this is an analysis of a selected illness memoir from the perspective of the body as a geospace. The researcher proposes to use close reading, analysis and interpretation of the primary source as a methodological tool to accomplish the study. Illness memoir included in the study, Suleika Jaoud's memoir, *Between Two Kingdoms* deals with different phases in a cancer survivor's road of life. Most illness memoirs typically emphasize only the successful recovery stories of patients. The present study is limited to a single primary source.

**Keywords:** Body, Illness, Survivor, Contested Geospace, Identity crisis, Journey

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### Introduction

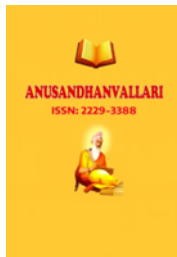
This paper attempts to apply Michel Foucault's concept of the medical gaze and biopower to read Suleika Jaoud's memoir, *Between Two Kingdoms*. This paper also addresses Foucault's limited focus on the resistance made by the subjects of (medical gaze) power. Suleika Jaoud's critically ill body can be seen as a geospace that is shaped and influenced by different social, cultural and medical factors. During the course of her cancer treatment, Suleika observes that her medical treatments are becoming coercing interventions over her body. She also feels that, she is being objectified on occasions where she loses autonomy over her body. Her medical procedures often fail to take into consideration, her feelings and her body becomes a space for examinations and control. Suleika gradually comes to the realization that her illness has taken control of her life, pulling her into a new reality where her world now orbits around various (geo)spaces—the hospital, her home, and treatment centers. Each space becomes a defining part of her existence, reshaping how she moves through the world and how she experiences her own body. The physical and emotional struggles endured by Suleika changes her perception. This research paper examines the various ways in which medical procedures and treatments transform a woman's body into a geospace; a site of interventions.



Suleika Jaoud is an American writer, advocate and a motivational speaker. She won Emmy award for her *New York Times* column, *Life Interrupted*, which she wrote during her four years of fighting cancer. Before being diagnosed with cancer, Suleika faced several health issues and the most disturbing symptom was an irritating itch. The memoir starts with the line, “It began with an itch. Not a metaphorical itch to travel the world or some quarter-life crisis, but a literal, physical itch”(4). Suleika struggles to find the exact medical reason behind her itch and exhaustion. She visits many doctors and clinics to pinpoint the cause and fails in her attempts. Everyone becomes unsuccessful in uncovering the root of her health problems, and many disregard Suleika's experiences despite her repeated appeals. Incorrect diagnosis made by the doctors confuses Suleika. She feels that her doctors are not addressing her concerns with the urgency it requires. Eventually, she feels as though she is overlooking the signs given by her body. She supposes that, since the doctors hold medical degrees and expertise in their profession, they are the ultimate authorities who have the power to read her body (Jaoud 31). Here, Suleika's lived body experience is undermined only as a disease state which has no clinical reason. ‘A patient's apprehension of the body-in-illness differs from the physician's conception of the diseased body’(Toombs xiv). Filled by sorrow and concern for her daughter's health, Suleika's mother takes her to a person; a self-proclaimed ‘cancer guru’ and that person warns Suleika against chemotherapy and similar treatments. Here one can see how fear of death makes educated people fall for alternative therapies.

Suleika begins her cancer treatment from Mount Sinai hospital and later discovers that cancer treatments might cause infertility in patients. As a patient, initially she had complete trust in the medical professionals. Suleika understood that embracing her role as a patient meant, she would have to adjust to a new reality, one where her previous lifestyle would be compromised, and she would be subjected to their medical surveillance. As stated by Foucault in his work, *The Birth of the Clinic*, “the most important moral problem raised by the idea of the clinic was the following: making a (poor) person the object of clinical/medical gaze”(77). By accepting her role as a subject of the medical gaze, what she expected in return was a complete cure from her disease. She believes that her doctors shattered her trust by not telling her in advance that cancer treatments would cause infertility. Suleika notices that, majority of the medical professionals who came to treat her were not at all bothered about her emotional condition (61). While trying to provide care to Suleika, her doctors categorized her only as a sick body devoid of emotions. What bothered her was that she was not informed about the side effects of the chemotherapy. The possibility of never becoming a mother to her own child makes Suleika think of freezing her eggs.(60). For Suleika, preserving her ability to have a child of her own in the future became her only lifeline to an uncertain destiny (65). Through this, Suleika tries to use the power of the medical field to her benefit. With this move, Suleika seeks to turn the medical system's intervention strategically, attempting to gain control over the influence it tries to impose on her body.

Suleika adapts with the changes that happened to her life after being diagnosed with leukemia. Her relationship with the spaces around her changes and an uncomfortable and foreign space like an oncology unit gives her a homely feeling. In Suleika's observation, “Just three months earlier, the oncology unit had felt like a foreign country; now, perversely, I felt at home among the chorus of beeping IV monitors and the bald-headed patients. I belonged” (89). She feels belonged and this could also possibly signify that her estrangement has begun with her former known and familiar spaces. Suleika allows the stagnating thoughts to overpower her mentally. Like the roots of a parasitic plant, the side effects of chemotherapy brings drastic changes to her physique and she feels stuck in her life without any further scope for the future (91). Suleika faces the reality that her path to recovery requires her to adjust to her new identity as a patient and strictly follow the guidance of her healthcare team.



Michael Foucault states that, “In disease, one recognizes life because it is on the law of life that knowledge of the disease is also based.”(Foucault pp 6-7) Nevertheless, Suleika discerns that, her illness has turned her into a second class citizen and the land of the sick is not for a person who lives 24/7. Suleika tries hard to appear optimistic and happy in front of others, but she grows frustrated as her former, cheerful identity is overshadowed by her new role as a patient. (96). The medical procedures and the monitoring routines of her medical team slowly start to irritate Suleika.

In Order to get temporary relief from her deteriorated condition, Suleika spends hours watching the medical drama, *Grey's Anatomy* and she asks a resident doctor whether her life bears any resemblance with the doctor's life on the show. While trying to see if the medical dramas resemble real life, Suleika, as a patient, uses the characters from these shows as a reference for her understanding of actual medical professionals. Beth L. Hoffman et.al. in the article, “Exposure to fictional medical television and health: a systematic review states that:

Cultivation theory, which is widely accepted by communication scholars, suggests that exposure to media, and to television in particular, substantially ‘cultivates’ viewers’ perceptions of reality over time. With regard to fictional medical television programming, cultivation theory suggests that viewing these programs could influence public perception of real-life outcomes such as the behavior of healthcare professionals, the set up of health care settings (e.g. hospitals), and the impact of medical interventions on disease progression.

Suleika decides to post on her blog as her worsening health makes verbal communication with others increasingly difficult. Her column writing in the ‘New York Times’ also starts motivating people. Her posts in the blog and newspaper column makes her popular and the increasing expectations and demands from the readers overwhelms her. She slowly starts to give fake replies hiding her anxieties and genuine feelings. She feels burdened by the constant pressure from her readers to deliver only motivational news. Suleika's boyfriend leaves her, as his role as a caregiver starts exhausting him. With the support of her friend Melissa, a cancer patient, Suleika forms a buddy group of cancer patients and they support each other whenever there comes a need. After completing her treatment, Suleika learns that her journey to the ‘kingdom of the well’ would not be an easy one. The regular treatments and assessments hinder her from feeling the sense of comfort and relief that cancer survivors typically go through.

Suleika's love for people, especially for the visitors who came to see her vanishes as their overindulgent sympathy irritates her.(76).She addresses such irritating people, ‘disaster tourists’. She puts on an act of sleeping to escape the visitors. She compares herself to a ‘medical carnival’.(76). She mentions on many occasions in the book about how the demeaning remarks made by some visitors unsettles her. Experimental cancer therapies makes Suleika feel that she has become a guinea pig and she demands complete cure.(78).Illness changes her relationship with her lover Will. She realizes that her illness has transformed Will's role from a boyfriend to a caregiver. The untimely entrance of menopause reshapes her body, transforms her perceptions about her identity and her inner sense of being. During this disruptive period, Suleika's physical and emotional changes bring estrangement in their relationship. Her illness and changing body makes her question her self-worth, causing her to feel insecure about fully committing emotionally and physically to a new relationship with John.

## Conclusion

Foucault's observations on the body as a subject does not address the resistance made by it. Mark J Smith in his article, “Contested Cultural Spaces: Identity, Discourse and the Body” from the book, *Culture: reinventing the*



*social sciences* points out that, “There is a tendency in much Foucauldian literature to assume that the body is passive or an effect of regulatory practices, neglecting the role of resistance.” Suleika learns to drive and embarks on a hundred-day journey with her pet dog, Oscar, as her sole companion, visiting some of her readers and acquaintances along the way. Through this journey Suleika decides to liberate herself mentally and physically from all the limitations set by her disease. For her, this solo trip becomes an act to transcend the boundaries and surveillance set by the medical institutions. After starting the treatment for leukemia, the medical field asserts its biopower over her body. As a subject of the medical gaze and biopower, Suleika’s life and her movements through various geographical and social spaces comes under the control of her medical team. Slowly Suleika succeeds in subverting the medical power through her companionship with Melissa and other fellow patients. Through their gatherings and sharing little moments of joy together, they attain victory over the medical institutions and their regulations and surveillance. Ian Anderson in his article, “Bodies, Disease And The Problem Of Foucault” states: Ultimately, Foucault's subjects of power are disabled by their theoretical status as bodies acted upon by the Panoptic gaze. Active participants in these processes do recreate relations of power, but at the same time they have the potential to transform the gaze. People bring to their encounter of the medical purview their own knowledge and experience. The outcome of the gaze is shaped by their practice as it is also shaped by the quality of medical perception. Giving the subjects of the gaze a more active role in the construction of their own experience gives them the potential to actually subvert medical power.

In order to overcome the identity crisis faced as the survivor of a chronic disease, Suleika uses this road trip to reclaim her freedom. For her, the van becomes a symbol of mobility and her pet Oscar, the symbol of unconditional love and companionship. Suleika’s body as a geospace goes through intense emotional and physical changes. The lasting effects of leukemia, chemotherapy, and transplant on her body and mind serves as powerful evidence of her survival.

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