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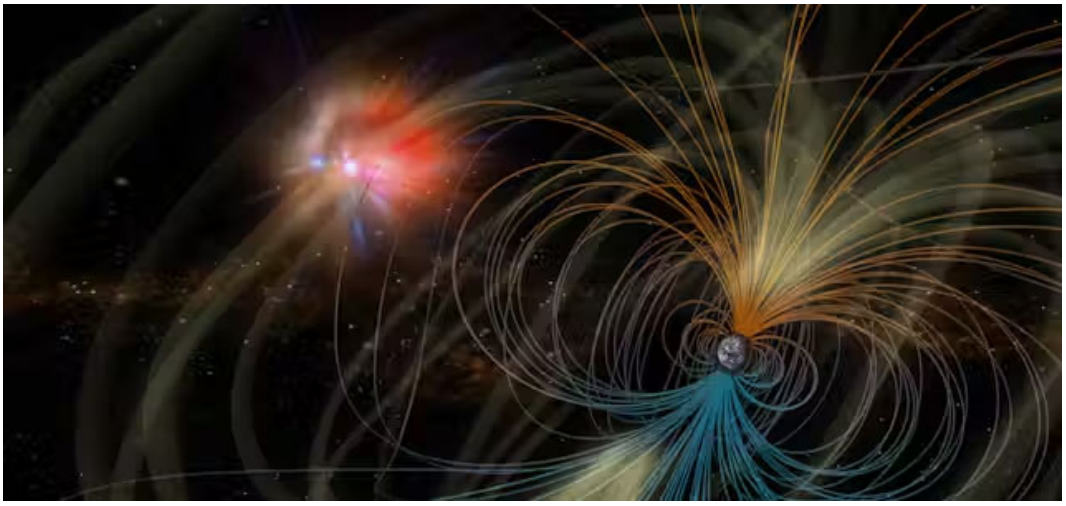

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Manifesto, theory, rant: Yumna Kassab's 'post-novels' have a bit of everything

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Jessica Gildersleeve

Professor of English Literature, University of Southern Queensland

Yumna Kassab's new book, The Theory of Everything, is not a typical novel. It is, its blurb declares, "a fictional theory, a rant, a manifesto [...] five mini-novels or else five post-novels".

But what is a post-novel? And what is the theory of everything?

Review: The Theory of Everything – Yumna Kassab (Ultimo Press)

A novel is usually thought of as a work of prose fiction that seeks to represent the world (or its own world, if we think of fantasy or science fiction, for instance). It generally includes characters, a recognisable setting, and a plot.

A post-novel, like an anti-novel, would disrupt those conventional narrative expectations. Famous anti-novels include James Joyce's Finnegans Wake (1939), Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy (1759-67), and Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire (1962), all of which equivocate or destabilise a traditional sense of story, character and setting.

The Theory of Everything is a "post-novel" composed of vignettes and fragments, parts of stories, poems, and other prose pieces. It presents a kaleidoscopic view of contemporary society – a "waste land", perhaps, to cite another work of experimental literature by T.S. Eliot.

The book is the result of Kassab's wide reading. It has been written in appreciation: a long list of authors to whom Kassab is indebted appears at the end of the book, from Omar Sakr to Virginia Woolf, Stephen King to Kris Kneen, Edward Said to Stephanie Meyer – although not, strangely, Joyce, Sterne or Nabokov.

But more than anything else, The Theory of Everything is a treatise on intersectional feminism. It traces the effects of social and cultural expectations on women and men in different places and times. Many of its vignettes take the form of lists, documenting the cumulative effects of women's experiences.

Sacrifice and prejudice

Kassab spent her formative years in western Sydney, studying medical science and neuroscience. The Theory of Everything is her fifth book in as many years. Her previous works – two collections of short stories and two novels – have been shortlisted for major national and state literary awards. She is also the inaugural Parramatta Laureate in Literature, a position she has held since 2023.

The Theory of Everything is divided into five sections or "mini-novels", titled Game, Gender, Modern, Silver, and Absurd. Game is perhaps the most conventional mini-novel of the five, gently introducing the reader to the more complex experiment to follow.

It tells the story of Khaled, a professional soccer player, utterly dedicated to the sport since his childhood. As his family grows and the travel required increases, he decides to prioritise his wife and three daughters, leaving soccer behind.

Khaled has transformed his disappointment in the lack of a son into pride in his eldest daughter, Aisha, who shares his love and talent for soccer. Aisha also becomes a professional player, but, unlike her father, she must grapple with gendered prejudice in the sport. She is

> *a victim not so much of her time but her place. Had she been in another country, her talents would have been celebrated, there would have been an eye on her progression to see how she turns out, yet she finds herself opposed again.*

Aisha's athletic aggression and intense focus are publicly criticised as hostile. Her partner must come to terms with "sharing" her with her fans and the camera. Game thus highlights that, for all Khaled had to sacrifice for his success, Aisha must navigate a thousand more obstacles to achieve the same.

A satire of apology

The next section, Gender, begins with a piece called Infanticide, about the murder of an unwanted girl child. This is followed by The Child Bride, in which a girl who has begun to menstruate is readied for forced marriage.

Following the story of Khaled and Aisha, the two scenes lure the reader into placing these concerns elsewhere – "that would not happen here", the Western reader thinks. But the scenes are followed immediately by Body Count: a list of female victims of violence at the hands of a stranger or of someone they loved. Objectification, victimisation, violence, murder: these do not know borders.

The victims in Body Count are catalogued as stereotypes, with reference to the reduction of such women to mere statistics. There is the woman "on the side of the road", the one who "long had difficulties" with her partner. There is the walker or jogger who meets with foul play, the "jilted lover", the one who simply "disappeared", the Jane Doe who is never claimed.

Asking For It similarly presents a list of the ways women "invite" violence, while Cataloguing Alterations documents invasive cosmetic surgeries performed in the name of "beauty". In Shame, Kassab offers a poem about women's shame at their own corporeal desires.

But this section of The Theory of Everything is not only interested in women's oppression. It also inverts this theme with its contemplation of women's power. Sorry begins with an observation of women's tendency to apologise for their presence, before turning into a satire of apology:

> *I am sorry I think you're a dickhead, an idiot, a lunatic, a psycho, asshole, I am sorry that we will never get along [...] I am sorry I have this mind and I speak it and I refuse to be your bitch.*

Woman // Her Words consists of vox pops by women in Australia at different points in time, their voices a cacophony of suffering and outrage. A longer stream-of-consciousness scene, titled She, appears to be a short work of autofiction, or perhaps an expression of the universal experience of the woman writer:

> *She (that insistence on the nameless she) doubts she has novels in her and instead she has discursive stories and fragments that begin nowhere and end nowhere, an echo of life.*

Ultimately, however, the writer recognises her own significance:

> *She wonders where she's going with this, she wonders if there is a point, if there needs to be a point, if she isn't living in a world that is post-point [...] no alpha, no omega, only she as the point.*

This leads to a manifesto of revolution and refusal – the culmination of Gender, and a clue to the significance of the "theory of everything".

Yumna Kassab. Joy Lai for Openbook magazine. Courtesy of Ultimo Press

Post-everything

Modern, the next mini-novel, begins with an epigraph: "Modern: uncertainty inflicted upon the world." Its vignettes depict an apocalyptic vision of a future (or present), where children who possess all material things suffer the loss of true joy, produce costs so much it is replaced with inferior alternatives, and people "[give] up and […] just do without". There are dedicated places to jump to one's death.

The section documents the damage done to human consciousness by handheld technology and permanent "connection". It asks why one would need to go "outside anyway". Alongside this, an index of 100 Points of Identity mocks government systems of identification by replacing the "points" with actual markers of selfhood: skills possessed, languages spoken, places experienced.

The fourth mini-novel, Silver, tells the story of a movie starlet named Lucille. The construction of her image coincides with the disappearance of her real self. As Lucille recites in one of her films:

> *Funny this disappointment, that the real should not be as vivid. In time, perhaps our preference becomes the dream.*

Just as Modern reflects on the loss of the self, Silver echoes Plato's allegory of the cave, in which people are fooled into believing shadows are reality.

Like the philosopher who is freed from the cave and can see the truth, Kassab exposes the flaws in our thinking. If a novel's purpose is to reflect our world, this post-novel's purpose appears to be to encourage us to question that world, to think differently, to see beyond the shadows.

The final section of The Theory of Everything, titled Absurd, describes the narrator meeting a vampire. Even as she recognises the impossibility of this encounter, she offers up freedom and transformation as the goals of her treatise. Once again, Kassab challenges our beliefs and expectations of the real.

Perhaps, then, this is the "theory of everything". Kassab depicts a world that is post-novel, post-real, post-point. Post-everything there is only the truth – but that might be more than one book can convey.