

AN EDUCATOR GUIDE TO

Author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Amal Unbound*

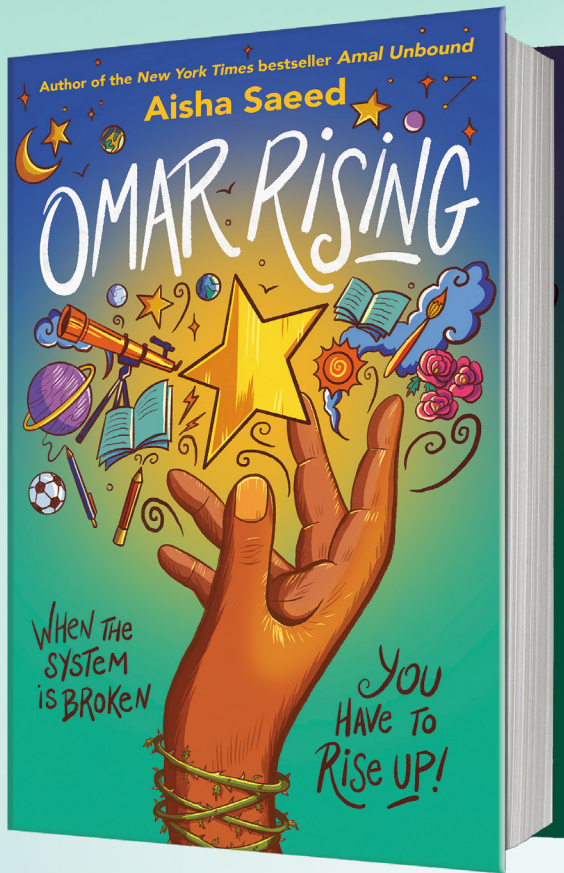
Aisha Saeed

OMAR RISING



WHEN THE
SYSTEM
IS BROKEN

YOU
HAVE TO
RISE UP!



BOOK OVERVIEW

Omar knows his scholarship to Ghalib Academy is a game changer, providing him—the son of a servant—with an opportunity to improve his station in life. He can't wait to experience all the boarding school has to offer, especially astronomy club and hopefully the soccer team, but when he arrives, his hopes are dashed. First-year scholarship students aren't allowed to join clubs or teams—and not only that, they have to earn their keep doing menial chores. At first Omar is dejected—but then he gets angry when he learns something even worse. The school deliberately “weeds out” kids like him by requiring them to get significantly higher grades than kids who can pay tuition, making it nearly impossible for scholarship students to graduate. It's a good thing that in his favorite class, he's learned the importance of being stubbornly optimistic. So with the help of his tight-knit new group of friends—and with the threat of expulsion looming over him—he sets out to do what seems impossible: change a rigged system.

Praise for *Omar Rising*

★ “A powerful tale about a preteen pushing back against systemic injustice.” —[KIRKUS REVIEWS](#), *starred review*

★ “A stellar novel which may open eyes to the inequities many young people face in their lives.” —[SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL](#), *starred review*

“Irresistibly appealing and genuinely inspiring—a story that helps us to see the world more clearly, and to see ourselves as powerful enough to change it.” —[REBECCA STEAD](#), author of Newbery Award winner *When You Reach Me*

This guide was written by [NAWAL QAROONI CASIANO](#), a Chicago-based educator and writer who works in education spaces to support a holistic model of literacy instruction. She and her team of coaches at [NQC Literacy](#) work with teachers and school leaders to grow a love of reading and composition in ways that exalt the whole child, their cultural capital and their intrinsic curiosities. She is the proud daughter of immigrants, and mothering her four young kids shapes her understanding of teaching and learning. Nawal's first book with Heinemann is forthcoming in 2023.



PREPARATION FOR EDUCATORS

Omar Rising takes place in Pakistan, and life there in many ways is different than it is in the United States. But at the same time, it is just the same: There are class differences perpetuated by societal injustices and a desire by its young people to make change. Ahead of reading with students, be sure to learn Pakistan's position on a map and refer to the layering text suggestions below to familiarize yourself with the country and its people.


It is not necessary to read *Amal Unbound* before *Omar Rising*, however, it is an excellent companion. Omar's mother works for Amal's family, and the duo are very close friends. In both texts, Omar and Amal break out of society's expectations by standing up to injustice. In both stories, Omar and Amal show that children can make a difference. And in both instances, young people cause ripple effects toward true systemic change.

Set Up the Reading

GET TO KNOW THE CREATOR

When we know the mind behind the story, we better appreciate the text. Before reading, spend time with students getting to know author Aisha Saeed. Here are [14 fun things](#) to know about her and [videos](#) about *Omar Rising*'s prequel, *Amal Unbound*. Here too is a feature on [We Need Diverse Books](#) that students can read for background information on Saeed's writing process.

Aisha Saeed is an award-winning and *New York Times* bestselling author of books for children. She is Pakistani American, born and raised in the United States, and her ancestral heritage is very important to her. Her middle grade novel about a young girl forced into indentured servitude, *Amal Unbound*, received multiple starred reviews and was a Global Read Aloud for 2018. Her picture book *Bilal Cooks Daal*, which invites readers to learn about and celebrate the everyday nourishment of a traditional lentil dish, received an APALA Honor. Aisha is also a founding member of the nonprofit We Need Diverse Books, which aims to elevate representation of historically marginalized voices. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her family; she is the mother of three boys.






Discussion Questions

The discussion questions below are meant to springboard conversation and not act as the sole learning around the text, as our role as educators is to provide transferable strategies and thinking frames for students beyond classroom walls. As such, the questions below grow across each category, in order to transfer thinking outside the text and into real life and relationships. Avoid solely plot-based comprehension questions without contributing to a larger conversation with students about what we learn throughout the text about empathy, ourselves, and the human condition. One way to set students up is for application in their own independent reading after their collective reading of *Omar Rising* as the anchor text. Don't forget, too, that the questions can be discussed verbally, in written form, or visually; in group discussion, partnership turn and talk, or whole group. There is no one way to demonstrate knowledge, but what is imperative is that students do the heavy lifting of discussion, practice, and thinking critically on their own and in community.



Focus on Character, Society, and Theme



- ✦ In the text, Omar describes a man he sees at Ghalib Academy: “He’s old enough to be my grandfather. I’m glad my mother was never treated this way. Amal’s family feels like our own. But I know this is the lot of many servants -- expected to stand at command while awaiting the next order from their employer. It’s the fate I’m here to avoid.” (p. 20–21) Characterization: What kind of person is Omar? How does he show empathy?
 - ✦ Throughout the novel, we meet other students and learn about their different motivations for being at Ghalib Academy. What are the various motivations driving Omar to succeed at this school?
 - ✦ Omar’s experience at Ghalib is different from most of the other boys at the school. He observes, “Watching my new friends complaining, I think about how different we are. For them, Ghalib is a given. It’s part of their family legacy. For me, it’s like a life raft.” (p. 41–42) Inference: What does Omar mean, and how does it shape our understanding of class differences?
 - ✦ Repeatedly across the text, Aisha Saeed shows injustice at the school. “*Kids like us*” (p. 48) “[W]hy weren’t we oriented to the fact that scholarship kids would be second-class citizens?” (p. 51). And “I’ve always known I’m poor, but until Ghalib, I never *felt* poor.” (p. 63) Inference: Explain your thoughts around Omar’s description of himself here. How does Aisha Saeed set up the differences between social classes, and why is it important for the story?
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Focus on Character, Society, and Theme

(continued)

- ✧ Soccer is an escape for Omar, where he is comfortable and safe. He says, “This school might make me feel like I’m trying to learn a new language without a translation guide, but on this field I know I belong.” (p. 71–72) Where do you feel most like you belong? When do you feel most safe?
- ✧ Throughout the text, we learn a lot about Omar’s friends at the school. Choose one of his friends and gather all the information you can glean about him. Make a web of characteristics, both internal and external, and doodle all that you learn about the character across the book. You might use the stems “the text says” and “this makes me think,” along with the page numbers to support your thinking. Teachers, you might allow for students to demonstrate this thinking in a notebook, visually via sketchnoting and drawing, or electronically on a slide deck.
- ✧ On page 155, Omar shares the Shehzil Mailk quote about being “stubbornly optimistic.” What does it mean for Omar and his way of thinking, and how can those two words juxtaposed together fuel you in the pursuit of your hopes and dreams?

Focus on Family and Community

- ✧ The relationship between Omar and his friend from back home, Amal, is a special one. How do you learn across the text of their meaningful friendship? How does Amal show up for Omar throughout the story? What does their relationship teach us about how we care for each other?
 - ✧ Omar meets Aiden, one of the rich students, at Ghalib Academy. How does Omar’s understanding of Aiden change across the text? How does Omar show empathy toward Aiden by the end? How can we better understand others, particularly when our life circumstances are so vastly different?
 - ✧ The kitchen at the school provides a warm and comforting environment for Omar in an initially cold and unwelcoming place. In what ways do the chefs and the kitchen nourish Omar? What do the chefs teach Omar about dedication, hard work, and what’s important in life?
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Focus on Family and Community (continued)

- ✦ At the end, though Aiden and Kareem are very different, they both show up for Omar in unexpected ways. How do these boys support Omar and a larger cause? What do their actions teach us about friendship and ultimately, the power of the collective?

Focus on Storytelling and Craft

- ✦ How does Aisha Saeed use figurative language like similes, metaphors, and descriptive language to build empathy and help readers feel connected to the text?

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE FROM THE TEXT	WHAT I THINK IT MEANS
"He barely speaks, but his presence is like a black hole swirling in the back of each class." (p. 28)	This is a simile because Saeed is comparing two things using "like." It means . . .
"Mr. Adeel's kindness is like an oxygen tank in outer space." (p. 31)	This is another example of a simile because Saeed is comparing kindness to oxygen, both something we need.

- ✦ The last line of each chapter often leaves readers feeling compelled to read more, with a precise feeling, or ready to make a prediction. Scan the ends of the chapters and share with a partner or small group how the author uses craft moves. What feelings are evoked in readers as a result of her writing craft?
- ✦ Titles are purposefully crafted by authors to convey meaning and entice readers. Why do you think the title of the text is *Omar Rising*? What do you think Aisha Saeed meant to communicate and connect?



Focus on Storytelling and Craft (continued)



- ✧ Aisha Saeed has said she writes stories set in Pakistan because growing up she did not see them in books and often, what little representation there was, presented Pakistan as a dangerous or scary place which was not the country she loved and adored growing up. In the Humans of New York Pakistan project, this final statement gives us a blueprint for how to more fully learn about and understand people and places different from what we intimately know. After reading it, think about what Omar's story taught you about Pakistan, its culture, and the kids there. What new perspectives did you glean?

A Final Word On Pakistan:

Imagine that every time you have a lapse in judgment, it gets printed in newspapers around the world: every time you lose patience with your children, every time you scream at someone in traffic, every time you drink too much and do something you regret. Each time you slip up, everyone hears about it. The world is never notified about the 99.99% of the time that you are a completely normal, productive, law-abiding citizen. The world only learns about you when things go wrong. Now imagine what the world would think of you.

It's not that terrorism, patriarchy, and violence aren't real problems in Pakistan. They exist and the country is battling these issues every single day. Pakistanis are very much aware of the extremism in their midst. The problem is that so many people seem to only be aware of that extremism. Because just as in the hypothetical example above—the other 99.99% of life just doesn't make the news. When there's only room in the newspaper for a single column about Pakistan, it's going to be filled with the most compelling story. And unfortunately, that tends to be the most violent story. And those are important stories. Those are the types of stories that expose corruption, stop genocide, and alert the world to emerging threats. It's right for those stories to be told. But when those stories are all that we hear, it's so easy to imagine a world that's far scarier than it really is. You lose sight of the 99.99% of the world that's not scary at all. And living in fear can be a dangerous thing. Because if we're afraid of each other, we'll never be able to work together to solve our common problems.

— From Humans of New York





Focus on Content Connections




- ✦ **SCIENCE:** Omar dreams of being an astronomer, a scientist who studies the sky, stars, and planets. Choose a planet or constellation to research and visually depict, then share your learning with your peers.
- ✦ **ART:** Teaching children to ask questions about art is no different than teaching them to ask questions about the world. Criticality muscles are transferable—from art to alphabetic text and beyond. The processes in the brain that build connections between what we see and what we infer, what we discuss and what we question replicate the very same reading understandings too. In the text, Omar learns that he enjoys making art, specifically collage, and he's ignited by discovering the stories artists are trying to tell. Along with students, spend some time “reading” Pakistani art. Flexing criticality muscles with students looking solely at visuals evens the playing field for all reading abilities, because all children can analyze it, leaving nobody excluded.


**Upon first interaction,
begin with simple frames:**

- What do you see?
- What do you notice?
- What do you wonder?

As students discuss, add:

- What story is this artist telling us?
- How is this art a form of protest or resistance?

- ✦ **EXTEND:** The cover of the book by Shehzil Malik depicts objects that represent Omar's passions. Have students visually design a cover to their own identity story. What objects represent the hobbies, people, and places you love? You might have students trace their hand to mimic the look of the text, or have them create collages like Omar does in the story. Alternatively, have students create their own protest art. First brainstorm with the class issues they see in the world that they want to take a stand against. You might look at protest posters together, using Shehzil Malik's art as a mentor. What do you notice she includes? Ask students, “What objects, images, and words do you think would tell your resistance story?” Allow students choice in medium and modality as they design their own protest art, then share with a wider audience.
 - ✦ **GEOGRAPHY:** Study the region where Pakistan is located on a map. What is the terrain like? How does it look similar and different to where you live? What types of cuisine do people in Pakistan mainly eat? Have students create a slide deck, poster with visuals, or a recording that shows what they learn about everyday life and factual information about Pakistan's makeup to share.
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WORKSHOP TEACHING: Example of Recommended Excerpt and Teaching Prompts


If you are a workshop teacher, you are thinking about chunking *Omar Rising*, teaching into the story, and asking that students try that thinking out in their independent reading. Here are some suggested sections to draw out. Encourage students to turn and talk with a partner before sending them off to apply strategies independently.

READ ALOUD CHAPTER TWO, from pages 7 to 8. At the end of page 8, you might pause and say, *I'm noticing Omar and Amal seem exceptionally close. I can tell Amal is a good friend when she mentions that forgotten items can be delivered by her father. Keep reading to the bottom of page 10. Pause and say, Now turn and talk with your partner: What other details does the author include to be sure readers understand Omar and Amal's friendship?*

Finish the chapter at the bottom of page 11 and stop. You might share with students your thinking around Omar's relationship with his mother here. Say: *At the beginning of this chapter, I inferred the responsibility Omar feels for his mother when the text says, "I glance at my mother. This is the part I've tried not to think about. It's been the two of us for as long as I can remember. My father died soon after I was born. Once I leave, she'll be alone." This part makes me feel like he is worried about her, and like they're a duo—a sort of two-person team. Let's look at the end of the chapter now. Turn and talk with your partner: How does the author reinforce their relationship? How do you think Omar really feels about leaving? What in the text makes you think that?*

Recommended Layering Texts for *Omar Rising*

It is critical that as classroom educators we don't elevate single stories as the monolithic representation of specific groups, particularly ones that are historically marginalized or underrepresented in US classrooms. As such, layering a variety of texts will help shape for students a more accurate understanding of people, places, cultures, and backgrounds. Furthermore, multimodal text layering provides for students varied entry points for engagement and taps into wide-ranging learning styles. In a workshop classroom, educators could offer these paired texts during independent work time for students to immerse themselves in and discuss, either in small groups or partnerships. For adult reading, the short story collection *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* by Daniyal Mueenuddin provides a beautiful, nuanced, fictional perspective of Pakistan's contemporary condition. *(continued)*

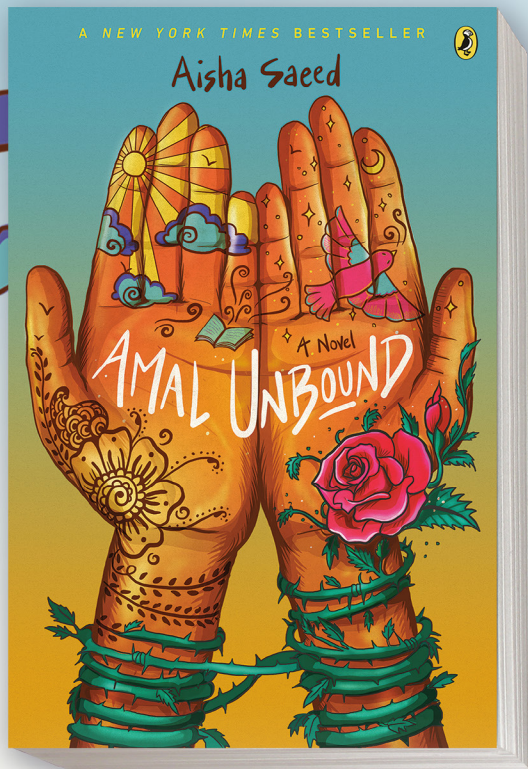


Recommended Layering Texts for *Omar Rising* (continued)

For all of the layering suggestions below, be careful to set students up to understand that it depicts one sliver of Pakistani life, and is never the sole representation for all Pakistanis or even areas in the country. Discuss with students the necessity to digest multiple perspectives and resources for a more accurate and comprehensive understanding.

CHAPTER BOOKS	PICTURE BOOKS	NONFICTION	VIDEO / MULTIMEDIA	ART
<i>Amal Unbound</i> by Aisha Saeed	<i>Bilal Cooks Daal</i> by Aisha Saeed	Britannica fact page on Pakistan	Mark Wiens's street food video near Lahore, where Omar lives	Explore the work of cover artist Shehzil Malik
<i>Amina's Voice</i> and <i>Amina's Song</i> by Hena Khan	<i>Lailah's Lunchbox</i> by Reem Faruqi	<i>Summers Under the Tamarind Tree: Recipes and Memories from Pakistan</i> by Sumayya Usmani	Medieval Forts Restored in Hunza Valley via National Geographic	Anna Molka Ahmed
<i>Unsettled (novel in verse)</i> by Reem Faruqi	<i>Malala, a Brave Girl from Pakistan / Iqbal, a Brave Boy from Pakistan</i> by Jeanette Winter Or <i>Malala's Magic Pencil</i> by Malala Yousafzai	<i>She Persisted: Malala Yousafzai</i> by Aisha Saeed	Humans of New York "images and essays about people of" Pakistan	Ahmed Parvez
<i>The Night Diary</i> by Veera Hiranandani				Shahzia Sikander
<i>Beneath My Mother's Feet</i> by Amjed Qamar				

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