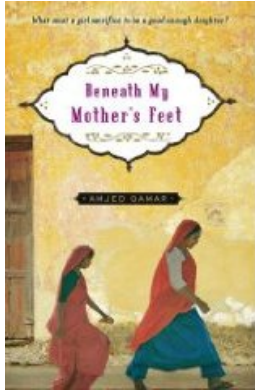


Children's Book Review

Qamar, Amjed (2008). *Beneath My Mother's Feet*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers. 198 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4169-4728-8 (hc), \$16.99 (Ages 12+)

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In her debut novel *Beneath My Mother's Feet*, Amjed Qamar provides readers with a window into one family's life in modern Pakistan. Fourteen-year-old Nazia is a dutiful daughter who excels in school and whose marriage to a cousin has long been arranged. When her father is injured and loses his job, Nazia's mother takes her out of school so both can temporarily work as *masis* (cleaning women) to feed their family. Unfortunately, when her uncle finds out that Nazia has been working and that her *jahez* (dowry) has been stolen, he cancels the wedding. As the family's circumstances continue to worsen, Nazia and her mother exhibit both mental and physical strength, doing whatever is necessary to provide for their family. In the Muslim faith, mothers are sacred, and Nazia's mother tells her "...all children know that the gates of heaven lie beneath their mothers' feet" (p. 190). Nazia loves and respects her mother but also begins to dream of following her own path through life, rather than the one that has been chosen for her. She tells her mother, "There are other possibilities in life besides servant, wife, or street girl" (p. 191). Ultimately, Nazia must decide whether she will follow the path that her family has laid out before her or whether she will follow her heart into an uncertain future.

Throughout the novel, Qamar's vivid, sensual prose evokes the sights, sounds, and smells of Pakistan. Her believable, three-dimensional characters transcend stereotypes and engage the reader's sympathies. Although Qamar grew up in Ohio, she lived in Pakistan for five years, and her experiences enable her to create a convincing and accessible portrait of modern Pakistani family life. Current mainstream U.S. media coverage of Pakistan tends to focus on military operations and Muslim radicals, so readers may be surprised to find that the characters do not conform to Western media stereotypes. Readers who are expecting submissive women are likely to be surprised at the strength of will and independence demonstrated by Nazia, her mother, and other female characters in the novel. Without making religion a focal point in the novel, Qamar skillfully weaves Nazia's religious practices into the story, providing readers with a portrait of how non-radical Muslims incorporate faith into their daily lives.

Primarily, *Beneath My Mother's Feet* focuses on complex and authentic family relationships. Nazia's father claims his injury is worse than it is to avoid working. Her brother, Bilal, has a college degree but fails to find employment and disappears. Nazia tends to idolize her father, while her mother reveres Bilal. Both women have trouble

reconciling reality with their idealized views of the men in their family. It is both interesting and unfortunate that there are no positive males in the novel, but Qamar does not seem to be issuing a critique: male weakness is intended as a family trait, rather than a generalization of all Pakistani men. When the unreliable and often absent men fail to provide for the family, this responsibility falls on Nazia and her mother. They have an interesting and convincing mother/daughter dynamic, in which Nazia is, by turns, compliant and defiant. Despite her occasional defiance, Nazia continues to help her mother clean houses, and her mother tells her, "A daughter is worth a hundred sons, no matter what the rest of the world says" (p. 81).

As the novel progresses, both Nazia and her mother demonstrate remarkable perseverance in the face of much adversity. Through their efforts, Qamar explores ideas of freedom and independence. Prior to leaving school, Nazia had accepted the future that was planned for her. As a young teen, she focused on schoolwork and spending time with her family and friends. Nazia's changing circumstances provide glimpses of various social classes in the city of Karachi and their interactions with each other. When Nazia must leave school, she believes her situation is temporary and trusts that her parents will resolve the family's problems. When she must work as a servant, she discovers that her mother cannot protect her from mistreatment by her employers. A fellow servant, Sherzad, tells her he puts up with terrible treatment because he has no choice: "We all follow whatever path our mothers have laid out for us" (p. 109). Nazia begins to wonder when she will have "the right to start thinking on her own.... Was there some unwritten law that said even when things were going wrong, when the choices that her parents made led to one disaster after another, she had to ride the waves, holding her breath?" (p. 113). She is torn between her duty to her family and her newly perceived duty to herself. At Nazia's urging, Sherzad tries to return to his mother's house, only to be beaten and brought back. Nazia is betrayed by both her brother and her father, but her spirit remains strong. As her eyes are opened to the ways of the world, Nazia's determination to follow her own dreams grows stronger. Finally, at the risk of disappointing her beloved mother, Nazia decides she must choose her own path.

Educators are likely to find a variety of uses for this book in their classrooms, as the universal themes will appeal to a broad audience. Qamar provides an Urdu vocabulary list at the end of the book to explain terms commonly used in the text. The novel is especially recommended for middle school students and would provide an excellent conversation starter for classes who plan to study Pakistan. *Beneath My Mother's Feet* is also highly recommended for middle and high school libraries.