

Mr Reid (in Ghosh's novel *Flood of Fire*)

Ambitious

Character Mr Reid is the Zachary Reid of the two previous books, but he deserves another sketch here because, as the central character in the series of three books, he undergoes a transformation in this last book. Whereas earlier, he was adventurous, even reckless, in *Flood of Fire* he becomes an engine of unlimited ambition. As Zachary himself explains, 'I am sick of sailing, risking your life every day, never having any money in your pocket....I don't want to be one of the deserving poor anymore.' Previously, he was charged with helping others escape a boat of indentured labourers and was acquitted, but is left with considerable legal fees. Mr Burnham hires him to refit a boat, and that is the beginning of Reid's rehabilitation. Now in close proximity to wealth and power (of Burnham), his own desires grow and grow. He also comes under the watchful eye of Mrs Burnham, who takes it upon herself to educate him in the Christianity morality. They end up having a torrid (and comical) sexual life together. Then in one of the most vivid scenes in the book, Reid takes his first step in imitating Mr Burnham when he buys a stick of opium in a dark alley in Calcutta. Now the gloves are off and Reid bursts into full life, using his 'can-do' spirit to become a corrupt and deceitful capitalist.

Activities Reid spends days in court, giving testimony, in his trial for mutiny in Calcutta. Later, when he's acquitted, he devotes his day time hours to working on refurbishing a boat owned by Mr Burnham. This leads to his sexual relationship with Mrs Burnham, which is described in great and humorous detail. Toward the end of the novel, he watch him on the streets of Calcutta, initiating himself into the opium trade. Under Mr Burnham's tutelage, he learns the tricks of the trade, buys himself a ship and soon becomes as rapacious as his mentor.

Illustrative moments

Ambitious In a telling scene, Reid reveals his shift of character in a conversation with a friend, who has brought him news of his old flame, Paulette. The friend says that she has asked about him (Reid) and she expects him to seek her out. Reflecting back on his earlier life (in the previous books), Reid says he will not go to her, that he has a sexual partner (Mrs. Burnham) and that he is 'sick of sailing.' 'Now,' he says, 'I want to be rich...I want to have silk sheets and soft pillows and fine food... I want to own ships and not work on them... I want to live in Mr. Burnham's world.'

Rapacious After one of their sex-fuelled afternoons, Zachary says, 'I have become what you wanted, Mrs Burnham,' he said. 'You wanted me to be a man of the times, did you not? And that is what I am now; I am a man who wants more and more and more; a man who does not know the meaning of "enough". Anyone who tries to thwart my desires is the enemy of my liberty and must expect to be treated as such.'

Comic Despite his success in business, Reid cuts a somewhat comic figure. Not because he is nouveau riche, but because his aping of Mr Burnham's world has taken him into Mrs Burnham's bed. During their energetic acrobatics, she demands that they address each other by their formal names (Mr Reid and Mrs Burnham) as a means of maintaining the pretence that the established order has not been overthrown. During their initial encounter, things proceed almost entirely by euphemism. 'It's my turn now,' Mrs Burnham proclaims, 'to bajow your ganta.' Later, when she teaches Zachary the art of 'chartering' (oral sex), she at first admonishes him: 'Oh no, my dear, no! You are not chewing on a chichky, and nor are you angling for a cockup! Making a chutney, dear, is not a blood-sport.'