

## **Zachary Reid (in Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies*) Adventurous**

**Character** Zachary Reid is an American born of racially mixed parents, and as such he represents the history of slavery in America. This 20-year-old, sharp-tongued son of a Maryland freedwoman is described as a man who 'laughed easily and carried himself with a carefree lightness.' He is sensitive, intelligent, articulate and later shows compassion and love to others, while at the same time looking out for himself. A key element of Reid's character and his identity is its hybridity. He is a 'mulatto', a combination of white and black parents, who speaks several tongues, American English, British English and pidgin, the language of those who speak different languages but must communicate on a sea journey. Reid begins his journey on the ship (which, we should note, was once a slave ship) as an ordinary sailor, but he rises up the chain of command through both his own talents and the fortunate loss of other crewmen. Although he gains authority over others, he remains trapped in the capitalist, racist and imperialist trade of the poppy flower. To succeed, he has to speak the language of the white man and imitate his (sometimes) cruel behaviour. Yet, he manages to retain most of his moral principles to the end. As the character who we will follow through all three books in this series of sea voyages and personal transformations, he embodies the spirit of the entire trilogy: adventure.

**Activities** Zachary Reid is the 'in between' man on the ship, the intermediary between the captain and the crew. He spends time in the lower deck, speaking with the crew and in the cabins speaking with the officers. During his time down 'below' he takes time to learn the pidgin language used by the Malay, Tamil, Indian, African and Chinese crew. We also see him move about in Calcutta, visiting gentlemen's clubs and restaurants.

### **Illustrative Moments**

*New identity* One of Reid's first tasks is to refit the decaying ship before its long journey to Mauritius. While supervising this work, Reid uncovers the slaving history of the ship. Ghosh describes the scene in these words: 'Zachary discovered that the 'tween deck, where the schooner's human cargo had been accommodated, was riddled with peepholes and air ducts, bored by generations of captive Africans.' As part of creating a new identity for himself, Reid removes these remnants of the slave trade, which is his ancestral past. The refurbished slave ship thus stands as a symbol of Reid's own condition that he wishes to erase.

*Principled* Reid's moral principles are severely tested in one dramatic moment on the ship. Reid is second in command, but another officer, Mr Cowle, discovers his mulatto identity and tries to blackmail Reid into joining him in a plot to take over the ship (if he does not agree, Cowle will reveal his background). Reid has distrusted Cowle throughout the journey and does not succumb to his threat. Refusing the offer, Reid says, 'I'm sorry but this deal of yours won't work for me. It may look to you as if you...have turned me inside out, but in truth it's changed nothing. I was born with my freedom and I ain't looking to give any of it away.'

*Compromised* At the same time, Reid is compromised. A 'free man' and an officer, he is still under the command of superior white men who control the opium trade. In the very next scene, Cowle brutally beats some of the sailors for daring to mutiny. Standing with a pistol in each hand, Cowle orders Reid to disarm the mutineers. With little choice, having sworn to obey the rules of the ship, Reid can only reply, 'Yes, sir.' The scene is even more sad because one of the officers has been killed and Reid is forced to name the murderer who is then hung from the ship's mast.

*Vulnerable* Reid is easily harmed, vulnerable to insults and humiliations. This edgy side of his character is demonstrated in a scene in the final pages of this long novel. When his true identity as a mulatto is revealed, he thinks (mistakenly) that Paulette (the young French woman he is in love with) is responsible for the revelation. 'Pray tell me, Miss Lambert, what was it for, all this trickery and deceit? Just to show me up for a fool?' She tries to convince him that she is not responsible and asks, 'in any case, what do appearances matter?' But he shakes his head and replies, 'I fear that I am too simple a man for these subtleties.' The scene ends with Reid again accusing her of mistreating him.