Finding the Centre

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most widely known Indians writing in English today. His books include 'The Circle of Reason', 'The Shadow Lines', 'In An Antique Land', 'Dancing in Cambodia', 'The Calcutta Chromosome', and most recently, 'The Glass Palace'.
Last week Ghosh came to Dhaka as writer-in-residence of the Independent University Bangladesh (IUB). In an interview with the Star Weekend Magazine, Amitav Ghosh talks about his work.

AHMEDE HUSSAIN

What is your earliest childhood memory?

Earliest I won't be able to tell, but I have a lot of early childhood memories centring on Dhaka. When I was three-four years old my family came here, and till eight I lived here. It feels very different now to recall, naturally everything changes in forty years. That day I have found the house in which we lived, so, it's an interesting thing to come and look for it.

I must say that I am surprised by Dhaka, it's wonderful how much park areas it has, how much greenery it has. The parks have really surprised me. I don't think its often that you see in South Asia a city that has so many parks, and they seem to be so well maintained, they look really, really beautiful. At the same time, a lot of the architecture seems unplanned. So it's kind of strange to reconcile the two, on the one hand you see something so well planned, on the other hand some buildings seem so haphazard and unplanned. Apart from this, Dhaka now seems a thriving, vibrant place.

Can you recollect one particular event of your childhood that has stirred you?

I can remember many things, I remember going to school, I remember my first day at school, I remember in that school, teachers used to beat us up with a ruler--I remember almost everything.

How important is a novelist's childhood to her work?

I think it's impossible to have a rule about that. Exactly how important it is I don't know, but one can say that childhood in different degrees is important to a novelist, there are some novelists who write about nothing but their childhood. There are certain writers for whom their childhood is the central experience around which they build their experience, that's not the case certainly with me. My childhood is very important as childhood is, but I would say that the later phases of my life have also been very important.

The reason why I asked is because I wanted to know whether every art in the broadest sense of the word is autobiographical.

The answer to that again is that it's particular to every individual writer. It is impossible to make a blanket statement on that. For me, I don't think my writing is very autobiographical. I am interested in things, which are outside my own experience. So a lot of my writing is not about myself at all, at the same time, it is also true that when you are writing a novel, in some way your experience, your knowledge of the world, what you have seen of the world-- all these things go into your book. Someone who has not seen anything, or has felt certain emotions, they can't write about it convincingly. So I would say that it's not autobiographical at all, so much as experiential. I would make a difference there.

Do you know your audience?

It's impossible for me to know my readers. At this point in time my readers are in so many places, in so many countries I can never know them. Essentially I have reached a point in my life where basically my readers are myself and a few friends, because there is no way I could know all my readers. I should think my books have sold, at least, over a million copies, how could I know? My audience is as such that, it's really myself and a few friends.