I was leading two lives that year; set against each other, they suggested a painless but mocking harmony. In Ballygunge I was the dutiful relative who paid Sunday morning visits to the family, ate rice and curried delicacies with her fingers, and sat on the edge of a bed gossiping with aunts or listening to the Bournevita Quiz on All-India Radio. But in downtown Calcutta, especially on Park Street or Chowringhee, I was the Indian memsahib with a white escort to be lewdly stared at, or to be whispered good day to by elevator-boy-pimps.

— Mukherjee 239

In her autobiographical narrative, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, Bharati Mukherjee explores the cultural tensions implicit in her life as a privileged Indian woman who returns to her homeland after becoming a Canadian citizen. Her Canadian husband and co-author, Clark Blaise, attempts to understand the traditions and the emerging political tensions of his wife’s native land. Separated into two sections, the book is an unromanticised, raw, humorous, spiritual, political and personal account of an India experiencing growing pains in 1973 as it deals with the clashes between traditionalism and the insurgence of Western capitalism. Contained within the narratives are the writer’s thoughts and observations on topics ranging from class conflict to feminism, from racism to personal enlightenment. Told from the perspective of a native Indian and a native Canadian, the book offers independent portrayals of India from both Eastern and Western perspectives.

Reviewed by Kelly Hulander
These perspectives parallel the internal conflict that Mukherjee experiences as an Indian woman who has left her traditional home to settle in the highly intolerant atmosphere of the West. After a fourteen-year absence from her home in India, Mukherjee returns to seek reassurance about her decision to leave India for Canada. In the process, Mukherjee examines the passed-over possibilities of her life as an upper-middle-class Indian woman. By talking to former schoolmates and relatives, people of her same class and background, she evaluates options available to women in India, and, in the process, questions the applicability of western feminist ideals to eastern Indian life. But more importantly, Mukherjee seeks to know if she can be reintegrated into Indian culture after a lengthy absence and a purposeful desertion of her ancestral, cultural practices.

In contrast, Bharati’s husband, writer Clark Blaise, is not seeking to reconcile his western self with India. Instead, Blaise attempts to reconcile India with his Western philosophy. Blaise is intensely interested in describing the contradictions of an India that doesn’t fit any of his academic definitions of how the world works. Blaise consciously and unconsciously repeats the question, If I want to understand India, where do I look? (52). This question haunts him as he shuffles between four star hotels, middle-class Indian cocktail parties, black markets in Calcutta and train stations filled with Calcutta’s most destitute people. In all of these places, Blaise confronts the contradictions of Western influence in a developing Eastern nation. As a westerner in an Eastern country, Blaise questions his place in an alien culture while his wife attempts to define her identity in a home country that has become alien.

_Days and Nights in Calcutta_ reads like a travel journal, a philosophical inquiry and a work of art. Mukherjee’s prose is ominous when she confronts the constant dangers that surround her, and bitter when she recounts the racism she experiences as an Indian woman writer in Canada. Mukherjee’s section of autobiography describes in exquisite detail the painful clash of her two identities. She also explores herself as seen through the eyes of two cultures, providing a powerful critique of xenophobic attitudes in the West. This book is easy to get lost in. It flows like fiction, but it’s vivid and real.

While the images presented in the book can be disturbing, Bharati harnesses them to find meaning. In one instance, after attending a ritzy gala, an upper class Indian friend of Mukherjee’s harasses a lower class Muslim man in an impoverished neighborhood. The friend pretends to be a police officer asking for identification. As her friend toys with the poor man, Mukherjee realizes that the man was suddenly not just a Muslim resident of a Calcutta slum, but he was also me, a timid, brown naturalized citizen in a white man’s country that was growing increasingly hostile to colored immigrants (250).
In her 1995 epilogue, Mukherjee acknowledges that her autobiography is not solely a story of a homecoming, but a story of coming to terms with her decision to settle among hostile neighbors (302). Mukherjee seeks personal solace when she journeys to India, but she also searches for answers to these potentially more universal questions: Are we all made up of fluid identities? Do our past and present selves ever merge? And, fittingly, she seems to echo her husband’s inquiry, If I want to understand India, where do I look? (52), by subconsciously asking: If I want to understand myself, where do I look?

In her epilogue Mukherjee says, I write to discover ideal worlds so that I may repair ruined ones(301). Her autobiography explores the strangeness of being caught in between two worlds, many of her other works deal with this same issue. Mukherjee is a well-known author of novels and short stories. While she was writing Days and Nights in Calcutta, Mukherjee was doing research for her novel Wife. Other works by Mukherjee include Jasmine, The Tigers Daughter, and her award winning collection of short stories, The Middleman and Other Stories. Clark Blaise is also a successful Canadian author. Together, the halves of their autobiography comprise a work of non-fiction that neither romanticizes nor degrades India. Instead, it fulfils Mukherjee’s stated goal to astonish and to shock her audience with depictions of an India that is very real and very individual.