‘The Golden Milkmaid’: a novel
and
‘Writing from the Gaudiya Tradition’: exegesis

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Preamble

My novel, ‘The Golden Milkmaid’, presents the literary tradition, lore and culture of the Gaudiya Vaishnavs. I lived immersed in Gaudiya culture for some decades and so have chosen to contextualize my thesis in the Gaudiya tradition. Several years living in the holy place which is the setting for the novel and a dozen trips there over two decades, meant gathering a trove of books, artwork, notebooks, journals, photographs, letters, recordings and memories. Affection for the Gaudiya faith and a wish to see it represented afresh for the general reader has brought this work about. The work is presented to counterbalance clichés or irreverence to do with the superficial spiritual-search-in-India; it reflects the sentiment conveyed in Gaudiya literature and the rich aesthetic culture of the Gaudiyas encompassing their love for a personal deity.

That this project might contribute to knowledge has been a creative impetus, but greater still has been the hope that it might contribute to human understanding. My work represents the Gaudiya other-world as ‘real’ to believers. It re-tells and re-presents the Kishori-Krishna narratives, not as quaint and charming myths, but as sacrosanct and as the very sustenance and sanctuary of believers’ lives.

The term ‘Vaishnav’ denotes worshippers of deities associated with Shree Vishnu including Shree Krishna. The term ‘Gaudiya’ derives from Gauda, a region encompassing West Bengal and parts of Bangladesh and Orissa, so named when the ‘golden avatar’, Shree Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534), instigated his major bhakti (devotionalism) movement there in the sixteenth century. This exegesis does not mention other forms of Vaishnavism such as South Indian or Assamese Vaishnavism; therefore Gaudiya Vaishnavism is often referred to simply as ‘Vaishnavism’. As is the norm in Gaudiya Vaishnav parlance, this exegesis sometimes refers to followers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism as ‘Gaudiyas’, their lineage as ‘the Gaudiya lineage’, their literature as ‘Gaudiya literature’, and so on. The terms ‘Gaudiya Vaishnav’, ‘Gaudiya’, and
‘Vaishnav’ are used interchangeably: ‘Gaudiya’ emphasises the distinctiveness of the Gaudiya Vaishnav line and ‘Vaishnav’ indicates a more general sense. Gaudiyas understand Krishna to be the source of Vishnu. The divinity represented in my writing is Shrimati Kishori-ji (Radha) and Shree Krishna both; energy and energetic source, Kishori-Krishna. As is the in-cult norm, groups of male and female devotees together are termed ‘Vaishnavs’ and a female Gaudiya Vaishnav is called a ‘Vaishnavi’.

This exegesis falls naturally into three sections. The first part, ‘Neti Neti: Not this, not that’, compares and contrasts ‘The Golden Milkmaid’ with relevant texts to put forward some ways in which it is unique in the context of Australian literature. The second part, ‘Devī: Goddess/woman/sacred land’, illuminates my novel’s setting and characters, thus elucidating its purpose. The third and largest part, ‘Achintya-bheda-abheda-tattva: inconceivably at once the same and different’, provides pertinent background on Gaudiya writing and so defines the context in which ‘The Golden Milkmaid’ was conceived. It proposes that the work of a modern-day, independent, female Gaudiya writer does and does not belong in a Gaudiya genre.

This thesis has been produced beyond the jurisdiction of ISKCON (The International Society for Krishna Consciousness) or any other religious institution.

A full glossary is provided as an addendum.