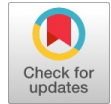


Metaphysical Horizon in Wanda Dynowska's Indian Poems

Marta Tiutiunyk



Abstract: *The article concerns the works of literature published by the Polish poet Wanda Dynowska (1888-1971). The sacred theme, which is ubiquitous in her works, will be analysed and interpreted. As a writer, translator, social activist and promoter of Indian culture in Poland and Polish culture in India and Tibet, Dynowska was an extraordinary woman. She does not belong to the group of the most outstanding Polish poets such as Wisława Szymborska, Czesław Miłosz or Zbigniew Herbert, yet her poetry is definitely unique due to the subject matter that is hardly found in Polish literature and the empirical sources of her work. What is more, Dynowska came to India in 1935. The experience of living in Hindu culture had a tremendous impact on her poems. Therefore, her poems and essays were published thanks to Dynowska's infatuation with Hindu culture, the writings of Krishnamurti and the spiritualism of Hinduism and Buddhism. The following works Mahayana Buddhism, On the subject of nature and art, Hindu poems were published thanks to the enterprise, which was funded by Wanda Dynowska and Maurycy Frydman. Indeed, they owed it to a Polish-Indian Library that was located in Madras. Surprisingly, only a few scholars such as Kazimierz Tokarski, Izabela Trzcińska and Ewa Dębicka-Borek scrutinised Dynowska's poetry at that time. In this article the poems titled Where are you?, My path, Shiva's Night, Near and far are interpreted. Furthermore, the philosophy proclaimed by Mircea Eliade, Gerardus van der Leeuw and Rudolf Otto is intertwined with a novel analysis of the poems. In addition, Polish sacrologists such as Stefan Sawicki and Zofia Zarebianka had a major impact on interpreting Dynowska's poetry. Consequently, the interpretation of the works shows that the sacred in the works of Wanda Dynowska is based on respect for the followers of each religion combining Christian, Buddhist and Hindu influences.*

Key words: Polish poetry, Wanda Dynowska, spirituality, Hinduism, Buddhism

I. INTRODUCTION

Wanda Dynowska (1888–1971), a Polish writer, translator, social activist, and popularizer of Indian culture, was an extremely flamboyant figure. Although she does not belong to the group of the most outstanding Polish poets, such as Wisława Szymborska, Czesław Miłosz or Zbigniew Herbert, and Tadeusz Różewicz, her writing is unique due to the subject matter left unnoticed in Polish literature.

For many decades, her work and biography remained forgotten as the researcher of Dynowska's works, Izabela Trzcińska, writes: Wanda Dynowska is one of the last century's most interesting figures of Polish culture. At the same time, writing about her today inevitably brings out the question of why her fascinating biography, unconventional views, and, finally, an extensive range of intellectual and social activities – first in pre-war Poland and then in India – have so far remained virtually unheard of in Polish scientific literature [1].

Dynowska owed her broad interests and freedom of spiritual development to the atmosphere of her family home in Polish Livonia – her teacher was Tadeusz Miciński. And Witkacy was a frequent guest of the Istalsno estate. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (Witkacy) was a Polish writer, painter, philosopher, and playwright, living from 1885–to 1939. His most prolific period occurred between the First and Second World Wars. His most important works include the novels *Pożegnanie jesieni* and *Nienasylenie*, the dramas *Szewcy i Matka*, as well as essayistic and philosophical writings.

Dynowska, despite growing up in Poland and her Catholic upbringing, drew on the spiritual heritage of Buddhism and Hinduism, as evidenced by her original *Indian Poems*. She created her definition of art, and she stuck with it in her writing: Art is never and can never be a factory product, a mass creation; it is the most individual and personal creative act in which the divine power of human being manifests itself most vividly [2].

This article presents the work of Dynowska, with particular emphasis on poetic references to Hindu and Buddhist spirituality and the associated road motif, which seems to occupy a special place in the poetry of the *Indian Poems* author. I attempt to answer the question about the meaning of the concepts of *sacrum* and *road* combined in Dynowska poetry.

II. WHO WAS UMADEVI?

Wanda Dynowska came to India in 1935. The experience of living in Hindu culture had a substantial impact on her – personal documents and early articles written in Polish testify to her fascination with India, Krishnamurti writings, and the spiritualism of Hinduism and Buddhism. According to Izabela Trzcińska, who analyses the theophysical interests of the author of *Mahayana Buddhism*, her stay in India led to Dynowska gaining a new identity and assumed name: "Wanda disappears, but Umadevi appears, who does not need to be introduced; she just creates her own story [3].

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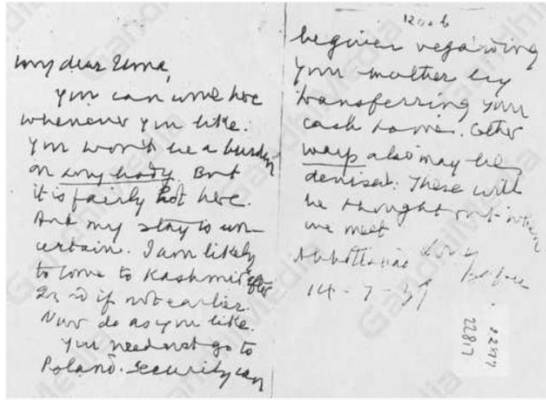
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Metaphysical Horizon in Wanda Dynowska's Indian Poems

Dynowska founded the Polish-Indian Library in India (together with Maurycy Frydman), which published works of Indian writers translated into Polish, texts on the spiritual development of Hinduism and Buddhism followers, and also popularized the works of Polish writers in Asia.

She is the author of cultural and religious studies: *Mahayana Buddhism. Scripture fragments, Gujerati, Do we live on earth only once; The thing about reincarnation, Sanskrit*. She received letters from Mahatma Gandhi, including those on material and spiritual issues. including those on material and spiritual issues.



A fragment of Mahatma Gandhi's letter to Wanda Dynowska of 14 July 1939

[https://www.gandhimedia.org/cgi-bin/gm/gm.cgi?action=view&link=Writings/Correspondence/1934_-_1948&image=WRCO1939071411.jpg&img=15&tt=, \[dostę: 15.01.2022\].](https://www.gandhimedia.org/cgi-bin/gm/gm.cgi?action=view&link=Writings/Correspondence/1934_-_1948&image=WRCO1939071411.jpg&img=15&tt=, [dostę: 15.01.2022].)

Dynowska described her idealistic motivations for popularizing Indian literature in Poland and Polish literature in India as follows:

To show the spirit of Poland to India, even to a small handful of lively and open-minded people – such as Gandhi; to show the spirit of India to Poles, even to a small but wide range of people, devoid of racial and religious superstitions, who love Human Being, no matter what part of the world they live in; who respect and value creative human thought, regardless of the forms and symbols in which it expresses itself [4].

As Kazimierz Tokarski notes, respect for another human being, his worldview, values, and individuality is a part of not only the life attitude of Wanda Dynowska but also the lyrical subjects she created in *Indian Poems*.

Ewa Dębicka-Borek writes about the strong impact of Wanda Dynowska's self-creation, which manifests itself in Umadevi's works and letters as a multilayered image of a carrier and defender of Indian culture, an erudite, a patriot with unlimited influence on the country's fate. However, Wanda Dynowska cannot be denied the right to perceive herself as an exceptional person.

The ability to embrace a broad spectrum of seeing India, and to find herself in a separate cultural reality, as well as the ability to see the world in a spiritualist way, based on Hindu and Buddhist spirituality, are reflected in the *Indian Poems* (1948) created before the Second World War in distant Bangalore and Madras. Dynowska hoped that her poems, which until now had not been subject to broader scientific research, "may one day become of interest to

Poles". After the death of the author of the *Indian Poems* in 1971, who spent the last years of her life in disastrous living conditions in Tibet and helped refugees (providing food, sewing clothes, teaching English, and obtaining scholarships), the only articles summarizing her life was published in "Tygodnik Powszechny". In memory of Wanda Dynowska, the Tenzin Chodon stupa was built in Tibet – referring to her Tibetan name. Wanda Dynowska found a new dimension of religiousness in her new surroundings. In her work, and especially in poetry, India has a primarily spiritual dimension. This spirituality is shaped by Hindu and Buddhist influences, but it is also associated with a certain supra-religious *sacrum*, which, as Stefan Sawicki writes in reference to Mircea Eliade's considerations, is sometimes: "simply an element of a literary work, the subject of interpretation, but it can also be a perspective for theoretical considerations, which allows for a deeper insight into the essence of poetry, its function in culture, meaning for a human being" [5]. The categories describing Wanda Dynowska's poems are also: "spirituality" and "metaphysics"[28][29][30][31][32].

Thomas Metzinger points to different dimensions of spirituality: places or objects of worship and philosophical understanding that refers to the existence and interpretations of the *sacrum*. Desire Mercier wrote about metaphysics more than a hundred years ago, referring to the philosophy of Aristotle:

Nowadays, it is commonly called the first philosophy, ontology, or metaphysics. The last name is nowhere to be found in Aristotle's works. It probably comes from his compiler, Andronicus of Rhodes, and was used as a simple classification to label the works that follow physical works in the Aristotelian encyclopedia [6].

According to Mircea Eliade, the concept of metaphysics is related to the opposition between the *sacred* and the *profane*, where the profane is not a contradiction of the *sacrum* but a specific complement to it. It seems that Wanda Dynowska's *Indian poems* reveal a metaphysical way of seeing the world, which consists in positively valuing the *sacred* and almost completely ignoring what belongs to the profane. The use of the concept of the *sacrum* creates the possibility of including religions other than monotheistic ones in a research perspective, therefore also religious and philosophical systems with a remarkable influence in Asia – Hinduism, and Buddhism. The belief in the possibility of experiencing the metaphysical side of existence always seems present in the work of the author of the *Indian Poems*, which are very personal. *The sacrum* has a supra-religious dimension in it and seems to be synonymous with the sense of existence and creative activity. Therefore, it is not only an object of interpretation and an element of the lyrical situation but also a perspective for existential considerations and valuation. Dynowska did not stop in search of a certain sacred sense and remained open to metaphysical experiences – as Tadeusz Pobożniak writes: "everywhere she saw the multifacetedness of unity of spirit" [7].



Buddhism, whose spiritual and religious heritage constitutes a source of Wanda Dynowska's inspiration, is a system of beliefs that transforms the mind and allows one to achieve a state of nirvana and detachment from suffering. Beata Szymańska-Aleksandrowicz writes about the beginnings of interest in this religious and philosophical system in Poland: Already in 1888, a translation of the famous "Buddhist Catechism" (Principles of Buddhist philosophy and morality according to the canon of the southern school) was published in Poland by the theosopher-Neo-Buddhist Henry Olcott, who, together with Helena Bławatska, founded and ran the Theosophical Society, promoting Buddhism. [8].

Defining Buddhism as a religious and philosophical system poses difficulties due to its numerous variations. Buddhism is considered non-theistic, but it accepts the existence of samsaric gods – including Hindu gods. To which Dynowska applies spiritual and terminological references, Hinduism is a collective term for the dominant religion in the Indian subcontinent in the past and nowadays. Gavin Flood, in the monograph *An Introduction to Hinduism*, writes about the diversity of Hinduism and the difficulties in determining its essence:

Ask many Hindus, and they will be sure of their identity as 'Hindu', in contrast to being Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist, yet the kinds of Hindus they are will vary a very great deal, and differences between Hindus might be as great as differences between Hindus and Buddhist or Christians [9]
[Original English source:
https://books.google.pl/books/about/An_Introduction_to_Hinduism.html?id=KpIWhKnYmFOC&redir_esc=y]

Tadeusz Margul, when analyzing the presence of the religion of India in the literature of modernism [10], which the poet was especially inspired by, writes about the superficial knowledge of Indian spirituality among modernists, but, like Dynowska several decades earlier, he also expresses the hope of a future deepening of the understanding between the world of the East and the West:

Such a more profound and kinder look at the treasures of the spirit of India was not yet within reach of the people of modernism. Their declared delight for the Orient was not reflected in a reliable and close relationship with Indian religions (...). Contemporary Hindu scholars, Buddhologists, Sikhologists, and Jainologists, as well as the great majority of Europeans, Americans, and Japanese, have already developed a balanced and revealing view of their spiritual good for the followers of this religion [11].

The poet of the modern era, drawing inspiration from Indian culture, was Bolesław Leśmian. As Jan Tuczyński writes about the interwar poetry of Leśmian:

The Orientalism of Leśmian [...] has many faces; it creates in this poet's art a system of symbols specific only to his works. These symbols operate based on the poetics of sleep and the psychology of depth. It should be noted that Leśmian has a good knowledge of Vedanta, Buddhism, and Schopenhauer, and all of this allows him to style Indian symbols creatively. Using the motif of *māyā* and the motif of a dream, he creates a shiny vision of a human being and the world, a vision oscillating between dream and reality [12].

Orientalist references, i.e. referring to the culture and religion of the East, can also be found in other Polish poets of the turn of the 20th century, including Antoni Lange, Wincenty Korab-Brzozowski, Waclaw Rolicz-Lieder, Tadeusz Miciński, and Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer.

III. INTERPRETATIONS

The poem *W bliskość i w dal* [Into the Nearness and Into the Distance] is a piece in which the sacred way of seeing the reality by Wanda Dynowska is especially present. At the same time, like many other works by this author, it gives the impression of being the result of a very emotional, expressive, and chaotic creative act. This might stem from the author's definition of poetry, which is reflected in this piece:

For poetry is not born of the intellectual perception of life, nor the thought of love, nor speculation over the truth. Poetry is not a story about magnificent phenomena nor a sophisticated ornament, skillfully and diligently laid out from the fragments of solidified lava, long since erupted from the inside of a volcano. Poetry is an outburst of a song straight from the heart filled to the brim, even regardless of the form; it then creates itself – a fresh, new one, carrying the blow of the inner measure of life [13].

God – the permanent addressee of prayer in *W bliskość i w dal* poem, has the characteristics of Christ and the Shiva at the same time. God is also called Shiva in a poem created in 1936, according to the author's record – on the Mount of the Goddess Chamundi, in the poem entitled "Gdzie jest?" [Where is?]. The human being affirming him says:
No faces, no forms,
No attributes, Shiva – You [14]

Due to the incompatibility with representations of this god characteristic of Hinduism, it is puzzling to deprive Shiva of any image. This feature seems rather characteristic of Christian images of the Old Testament God (as having no bodily form). Extremely specific Christian thinking about Hinduism is revealed in the following words of the poem:

Shattered in countless shapes,
you're complete, incalculable,
confined by a crucifixion
to all things of the earth and the heavens [15].

The term "crucifixion" found in this piece seems to be a reference to the passion of Christ, not to Hindu representations of the Shiva. The praying woman also mentions the "son of Shiva", which might be associated with the biblical images of the Old Testament God and Christ – in the poem *Modlitwa matki Sanjasina* [Prayer of Sanyasi's Mother], she writes: "For the son of Shiva walks/ and bears his message to you"[16]. Perhaps the combination of Christian and Hindu ideas is visible in a poem about the multiformity of God – also present, although in a limited number, in the Christian image of the Holy Trinity. The praying lyrical subject characterizes the presence of God, describing it as infinite.

Referring to the extraterrestrial and real space – the earthly one, she speaks about the form of this divine existence: "there – the silence of lasting, here – the vortex, the change of movement". This poem mentions the wife of the god Shiva – Shakti – formless in the sacred images. As a mother, she seems to be seen as similar to Mary, that is the mother of Christ: In all the massiveness of objects and the human elusive world, you can feel the homogeneous sea of waves – Life of the One and Only Mother, Yours, Shakti [17]?



The statue of the terrifying Shiva in Kathmandu (author's own source)

Of special value to the praying woman is the state in which a human being "does not burst out with longing, does not strive, does not do, does not desire, but simply – is". This state is close to nirvana. The concept of nirvana occurs in the poetry of Young Poland. It is especially present in the poems of Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer, among others in *Hymn do Nirwany [the Hymn to Nirvana]* from the volume *Poezje [Poetry]. The second series* (1894) or in a poem under the same title by Edward Leszczyński:

Nirvana, come down!
Tread the flowers with your silent steps,
Lay your still, pale face
On our trembling breast
And, leaning over, whisper softly,
That you're plunging us into a black depth,
That you're giving us an unknowable dream
And the nothingness of bodies
And the nothingness of souls [18].

The attitude of the praying woman in the poem *W bliskość i w dal* is characterized by gratitude for entering the path to rebirth:

And yet in Your grace one can live,
like in a volatile-dense streak of light,
and one's heart can be with You
with some kind of internal, underground breath,
cease to exist and exist again [19].

Dynowska is definitely *far from being* faithful to religious dogmas and conventional perceptions of religion. The lyrical subject in her poem search for *the sacrum* takes place primarily through the individual existential experience and noticing its manifestations in the environment:

Who can hear your words
in stone and child,
in the soil of the roads and the silver dust of the stars,
in normal household appliances,
in the mountainous peaks of the Himalayas
and in every, every, every
subject of this land [20].

Perhaps the concepts of "way" and "wandering" are the key to reading her poems on sacred themes.

IV. THE WAY IN WANDA DYNOWSKA'S POEMS

In Wanda Dynowska's pieces, India is associated with the need to experience "being on the way" – making trips but also "taking the path of one's development". The poet emphasized the differences in the understanding of the term "way" in Western culture as well as Hinduism and Buddhism:

There are many legends and stories about this way, some deeply touching, though almost beyond our human imagination, as it cannot operate with enormous periods of history that Hinduism and Buddhism are used to [21].

In the poem *My Way* by Wanda Dynowska, as in other pieces, India constitutes not only a cultural space but also an area of existential experience, the acquisition of which does not take place according to a specific plan and does not fit into a conventional social or religious framework. The term "roadlessness" present in the piece means not so much the lack of a plan for life but the conviction about the value of freedom of choice: "because my way is probably a roadlessness; I do not follow any outstanding trails". Then Dynowska writes about her nonconformism and tendency to question authorities:

I cannot accept science
even if it comes from the highest masters
– though I'd be ready to honour them all –
if I don't feel it in my heart [22].

As in the poem, *W bliskość i w dal*, the expressive affirmation of life experienced on the road and respect for it are visible here. Fervent worship for existence is also an act of faith:

I welcome Beauty with delight, I adore Life passionately,
everywhere, in everything and everyone.
I kneel in exultation, and in worship, I bow
when the blow of Greatness reaches me.
When I see *Him* suddenly, through the curtains of matter
and forms.

In this poem, Wanda Dynowska, similarly to Leopold Staff in *Przedśpiew* from the volume *Galąź kwitnąca* (1908), affirms the existence and some repeatability of it:

Lord, life is still new,
Unknown, incomprehensible every step of the way [23].

However, the praise of existence present in both poems was undermined by the awareness of the presence of suffering and sadness:

And I commend the secret of living in song and silence,
Peaceful with wise sorrow and skillful in suffering [24].

The attitude of affirmation also applies to images of nature, which is often personified and empowered in these poems. Like the artists of the modern era, Dynowska seems to be enchanted by the infinite wealth of Nature, which has a special value for her and has been bestowed with the highest respect:

Storm, quiet down for a second.
go to Shiva to Darshan...(…)
oh, rain, wait a minute,

listen to the dream of mother's heart [25]

In the poem *Gdzie jesteś? [Where are You?]* Dynowska writes about an undefined place of balance and meeting with the *sacred* and, at the same time, asks the question about them:

There is a point between the two poles
Para-Shiva and Para Shakti (...)
Through this point you are looking,
Beloved, You – Light of Light
of my soul (...)
Oh, Lord, where are you?
In this point? Invisible, hidden,
or obscured by my tears [26].

V. CONCLUSION

The first condition for meeting with *the sacrum* and experiencing its presence in Wanda Dynowska's works is "setting off". The way is the addressee of one of the prayers of *Wiersze Indyjskie* – it is full of thorns and sharp pebbles, but it recognizes the "effort of the aged peasants and women carrying things" and gives hope for the fulfillment of the request expressed by the words: "wrap, embrace, sway like a whirlwind, feed with your breath" [27]. According to Dynowska, the second *sine qua non* of metaphysical experience, both in poems and in theological and philosophical texts, is mindfulness:

The state of concentration, meditation is your true nature. You call it meditation today because there are other thoughts in you that consume your attention; but when those thoughts disappear, you will remain with yourself, that is, in a state of concentration free of all thoughts, and that is your essential nature; and now you are trying to reach that state by pushing away other thoughts, and you call that meditation. But when you go on for a long time with this practice, your essential nature turns out to be a true, profound focus.

The sacrum in the pieces of Wanda Dynowska has a specifically heterogeneous character based on the combination of Christian, Hindu and Buddhist influences. At the same time, modernist inspirations can be found in this poetry. The circle of themes of the discussed poems: *W bliskość i w dal*, *Moja droga*, *Gdzie jesteś? Modlitwa matki Sanjasina* focuses on sacred themes (soul, images of gods, spirituality) and is inseparably connected with the multifaceted approach to the concept of the road – in the metaphorical sense (paths of individual development) and literal (travel), but also in the Wanda Dynowska-specific perception of the road as the pursuit of the development of inner strength and approaching the supra-religious *sacred*. Her poetry, thematically and formally close to the modernist one, is characterized by the presence of sacred issues, which combines Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian influences in an innovative way.

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