

**Amadou DANLAMI**

University of Dschang – Cameroon

danlamiamadou@yahoo.com

**Womanist Perspectives in *This Poem and Other Poems* (2021), *Tender Ties* (2022) and *The Return: Poems, a Poem* (2022) by Ernest Veyu**

**Abstract**

Viewpoints about the status of women in Africa are deeply polarized. This is because some scholars affirm that women are marginalized and treated as second class citizens; while others opine that they are emancipated and exercise power in their families and communities. This work examines Ernest Veyu's vision of the woman's condition in his poetry collections *This Poem and Other Poems*, *Tender Ties*, and *The Return: Poems, a Poem*. The research is anchored on the following question: what is Ernest Veyu's perception of the situation of women in his poems? It is hypothesized that the poet presents instances in which women are maltreated, occasions in which females flaws and cases where they are valorized. The poems are analyzed using Africana Womanism as promulgated by Hudson-Weems to arrive at the conclusion that the poet projects an amelioration of the woman's worth based on African cultural norms.

**Key-words:** Gender, Patriarchy, Marginalization, Emancipation, Africana Womanism, Culture

**Résumé**

Les points de vue sur le statut des femmes en Afrique sont profondément polarisés. En effet, certains chercheurs affirment que les femmes sont traitées comme des citoyennes de seconde zone, tandis que d'autres pensent qu'elles sont émancipées et qu'elles exercent un pouvoir au sein de leur famille et de leur communauté. Ce travail examine la vision d'Ernest Veyu de la condition féminine dans ses recueils de poèmes *This Poem and Other Poems*, *Tender Ties*, et *The Return : Poems, a Poem*. La recherche s'articule autour de la question suivante : comment Ernest Veyu perçoit-il la situation des femmes dans ses poèmes ? L'hypothèse est que le poète présente des cas où les femmes sont maltraitées, des cas où les femmes ont des défauts et des cas où elles sont valorisées. Les poèmes sont analysés à l'aide de l'Africana Womanism promulgué par Hudson-Weems pour arriver à la conclusion que le poète projette une

amélioration de la valeur de la femme basée sur les normes culturelles africaines.

**Mots-clés** : Genre, Patriarcat, Marginalisation, Emancipation, Africana Womanism, Culture

## **Introduction**

There are diverse opinions about the rights of women in the world in general. With regards to Africa, some scholars posit that women are marginalized and endure a lot of hardship due to the social structures of African societies. Koumagnon A. D. Agboadannon is among those who share this conviction as he states that: "In patriarchal societies, women are faced with all sorts of dehumanisation ranging from deprivation, negligence, maltreatment, marginalisation, oppression, subjugation, exploitation, humiliation and even isolation, all of which emanate from aspects of the people's culture. [...] Hence they are regarded as second class citizens"(4). He indicates that Africa is one of the patriarchal societies indexed above as he adds thus: "Patriarchy as a way of doing things has been so deeply entrenched in most African settings, in norms, values and customs" (5). This links patriarchy to Africa directly.

On the other hand, there are researchers who affirm that women in Africa are not neglected and do not suffer in the patriarchal societal setups. Susan Arndt for instance, submits that: "Indeed, many African women are notable for their strong personality and dominant character. They are the heart of the family, and seem to hold many reins of family and communal life. Besides multiple forms of unofficial power, in many traditional African societies such as in Ashanti, Yoruba and Igbo society women too held official power"(22). However, she admits that women have lost their dominance and influence in most parts of Africa. Unlike Agboadannon who attributes the loss of women's power to patriarchy, Arndt holds that patriarchal communities upheld the status of the woman until colonialism disrupted it. Her stance is that "Since colonialism destroyed most of the spheres of official power which women commanded in traditional African societies, in contemporary Africa in public life, as well as in the family, only unofficial opportunities for influence are available to women" (22). Gracious Madondo has a similar opinion as evident in his declaration that: "In Africa, the harmony between sexes was mostly affected by changing political agendas. It is therefore without doubt that gender inequality in Africa owes its legacy to colonialism" (2018). To her, patriarchy is not originally African.

Since some people assert that women are marginalized in Africa for various reasons while others argue that they are dominant, the outcome is that feminism, the movement for the emancipation of women's rights and their equality with men, is perceived differently. Critics like Rosemary Moyana are in favour of feminism in Africa as she states that: "Those women who struggle without giving up hope, herald the impending change

[...] change in attitude for both men and women as they evaluate and re-evaluate their social roles" (Quoted in Agboadannon iv). Malebo Sephodi buttresses the point thus: "I want to live in a society where we are all liberated. This is what my feminism looks like. [...] To misbehave is to denounce the social norms that limit individuals based on who they are. That to make history is to upset patriarchy, a system that is intent on controlling and marginalising others." (Sephodi 1). Therefore, feminism is necessary.

Other analysts find feminism unnecessary and inapplicable in Africa; and dissociate themselves from it. One of such authors is Flora Nwapa about whom Arndt declares that: "The Nigerian woman writer Flora Nwapa expressed indignation at the fact that, just because she wrote about women, she was constantly "accused" of being a feminist. But the truth is that she wanted nothing to do with feminism because of its anti-men stance. At most, she said, she could identify with Alice Walker's womanism" (15). Similarly, Buchi Emecheta, in an interview with Ravell-Pinto denied being a feminist because of its western philosophical foundation that makes it inappropriate in Africa. Thelma Ravell-Pinto quotes Emecheta as follows: "My novels are not feminist [...] I deal with a variety of topics in my novels that are certainly not feminist: war, colonialism and the exploitation of Africa by the West, and many others.[...] They are only concerned with issues that are related to themselves and transplant these onto Africa. [...] They think that by focusing on exotic issues in the "third world" they have internationalized their feminism"(50). These authors are against the presence of western style feminism in Africa.

As seen above, debates about the situation of the woman in Africa are ongoing and there is no unanimity about it. Writers have also presented their visions about feminine dynamics in their texts. Agboadannon asserts that literature is a reliable means of projecting societal realities as he states that: "Literature in its oral and written forms has consistently remained the most evident tool to represent reality. It has become an important means of understanding and interpreting aspects of society such as politics, religion, social conflicts, class struggle and the human condition all over the world." (10). Stretching the point further, Chinua Achebe claims that a writer has a responsibility to sensitize readers about societal happenings and so "The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of reeducation and regeneration that must be done". (Achebe, *Hopes*, 64). Ernest Veyu presents societal realities in his poems.

This work examines the way the Cameroonian writer Ernest Veyu represents the situation of women in his collection of poems *This Poem and Other Poems*, *Tender Ties*, and *The Return: Poems, a Poem*. The question that guides this article is: what is Ernest Veyu's perception of the status of women in his poems? It is hypothesized that the poet presents instances in which women are maltreated, situations wherein females

transgress and cases where they are valorized. Africana Womanism as theorized by Hudson-Weems is used. Africana Womanism is a theory of analyzing the status of African women in literature because the feminist theory is west-oriented and does not consider the culture and realities of African women. Hudson-Weems states: "I upheld the position that Black women – by our very nature & the primacy of racial oppression -- are not feminists, though it may well work for white women who designed it based upon their needs" ("Africana Womanism: Nobel Laureate" 1). She changed the name from Black Womanism to Africana Womanism because it is more applicable in African women due to its capability of "establishing her cultural identity, [which] relates directly to her ancestry and land base–Africa" (Hudson-Weems, Africana Womanism: 14). She did so in 1987.

Unlike the "Eurocentric feminism" (Hill *et al* 1735), Africana Womanism "[...] is grounded in African culture and, therefore, focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women" (Hudson-Weems, Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves, Fifth Edition 15). Hudson-Weems adds that: "The key to the true meaning of Africana Womanism is its mandate for inclusion of the whole family, men included, while highlighting also the very presence and role of the Africana Womanist in concert with her male companion in the ongoing cooperative struggle against racial dominance" (Hudson-Weems, Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves 5th Edition 9). This paper uses the Africana Womanism theory by Hudson-Weems to examine Ernest Veyu's vision of the situation of the woman in the poetry collections under study. It is divided into three parts namely: "Maltreatment of Women", "Ladies' Unpleasant Accomplishments" and "Valorization of the Female Folk".

## **1. Maltreatment of Women**

There are instances where societies or individuals mete out some undesirable treatment to women which they do not exert on men. Agboadannon highlights this when he states that: "From girlhood to womanhood, the African woman has had to contend with many issues that restrain her 'being' as she journeys through life's winding cycles dictated by culture and cult"(7). This section examines Veyu's presentation of the instances wherein the African woman is maltreated.

Widowhood is one of the situations in which women suffer. The poem "Suddenly You Feel Alone" projects the trauma a widow goes through; not just from the loss of her husband but especially from her interaction with the deceased's family and friends. The poem opens thus:

Widowhood;  
A stinging word,  
with dreadful,  
And painful realities;  
Victimisation,  
Discrimination,  
Vulnerability,

Despicability. (Veyu *The Return* 5)

These numerous ills that befall widows corroborate Agboadannon's submission that: "Women are faced with all sorts of dehumanisation ranging from deprivation, negligence, maltreatment, marginalisation, oppression, subjugation, exploitation, humiliation and even isolation"(4). The painful realities such as victimization, discrimination, vulnerability and despicability that the widow goes through as mentioned above are so serious that divine intervention is needed to prevent her from complete breakdown. The poet hints that the widow's fate can destroy the children because she will not be able to control them and consequently, they may go astray. This is brought out when the poet declares that:

If you don't pray,  
The widow is prey.  
If the widow is prey,  
The kids may stray. (Veyu *The Return* 5)

The emphasis on the suffering of the widow and the consequent danger that looms on the kids is signaled by the repetition of "The widow is prey". The widow is even accused of being responsible for the death of her husband because in many African setups there is no natural death as such. The poem reveals that:

All who die,  
Did not die;  
They are killed,  
By a fiend, Or a friend (Veyu *The Return* 6)

As a result, the widow must be the first person to answer questions. She must prove her innocence or confirm her guilt. The poem continues with the woman facing questions. Woman, what happened to our son?

Are the words of strife,  
To a widowed wife,  
Calling her to bar,  
Even to war. (Veyu *The Return* 7)

If she proves her innocence, other charges will emerge. When she does, she is blamed for passively causing his death by not doing enough to save his life. They ask her if she lacked the money with which to "buy his life". If that was the case, she still showed negligence by not letting them know. The poet states:

Was there no money,  
With which to buy his life?  
Why did you not call us,  
Our wife? (Veyu *The Return* 7)

If she clears her name of such accusations of passive implication in the death of her husband, the widow's trial does not end there. She is asked if she does not know any person who "Got a hand in this"? If her answer is negative, the deceased's family members put the widow under pressure to

reveal all the financial possessions the man had in his accounts, office, purse and house even before the burial is planned; claiming that it will help in the burial. The poem unfolds thus:  
Is there money?

Check the accounts,  
In his banks.  
Check his purse,  
And the house. (Veyu *The Return* 9)

The widow's ordeal continues in the poem "When a Corpse Goes Back Home". When a corpse is taken to the village for burial, the widow is put under microscopic observation by the villagers who scrutinize everything she does and analyze each word she says; with the aim of levying accusations on her. She could be accused of marital unfaithfulness based on the way she cries and the proximity of people to her. The poem opens as follows:

If the spouse was unfaithful,  
And had an affair,  
The neighbours may know,  
From the way s/he cries,  
And who comes, how close. (Veyu *The Return* 29)

Another poem in which Veyu presents and logically concludes the plight of a widow is "What if I remarry?" This poem exposes the internal conflict a widow goes through as she contemplates getting married to another man after losing her husband. In this internal dialogue, the persona, a widow, asserts that she has all the rights to remarry because her late husband would not have remained single if she had died. However, she indicates that it will not be easy for her to remarry because she has children, property and accountability she says is "Imposed upon me by the family!" (Veyu *The Return* 57) In the following metaphor fused with repetition she compares the idea of getting married to another man after Pa's death to adultery: "Looks like adultery, I cannot, I cannot." (Veyu *The Return* 57) This comes after she rhetorically asks if she can really forget Pa "And fall into the arms of another man?" (Veyu *The Return* 57). She says although Pa would have remarried if she had died, it is not the case with her because "Widows mostly have affairs" (Veyu *The Return*. 57); adding that nobody wants to marry a widow. On this note, she accepts the fact that she cannot remarry despite her desire to do so by declaring that: "*I am not a man; // I am a woman. I am a woman. I am a woman*". (Veyu *The Return* 58)

This contrast between a man and a woman coupled with the repetition of "I am a woman" shows the difficulty widows face while trying to remarry though widowers have no such problems.

Rape is also presented by Veyu as an ill that hurts women. This is highlighted in the poem "She Never Came Again" wherein the poet makes literary allusion to "The Rape of Michelle" by Bole Butake. While teaching

the play, the female teacher defiantly wonders how a lady like her could allow herself to be raped. At times, rape victims are blamed for attracting their rapist(s) or for not resisting enough. This often makes it difficult for them to speak out for fear of stigmatization. Thus the female teacher mocks rape victims. The persona, her student, joins the others in laughing loudly with her until a female student interrupts with the question "Will you love the experience, Madame"(Veyu *Tender Ties*. 54)? The teacher, in amusement, replies that: "Oh ya, but let them try! I dare all of them"(Veyu *Tender Ties*. 54). Unfortunately, she too was raped as her student announces the following day: "Hi friends, our Madame got the experience. She's not coming"(Veyu *Tender Ties* 54). The experience was so traumatizing that "She never came again."(Veyu *Tender Ties* 54) Here, a woman does not empathize with female victims of rape and is later on raped also. From the African womanist perspective, she is to blame for her insensitive reaction. This shows that female victims of rape suffer not just physical, emotional, psychological and moral trauma; but also, material and professional hardship.

The poet also presents girl child marriages in the poem "Still Waiting and Praying" wherein girls as young as ten are betrothed. Arguably, ten-year-old girls do not have the maturity to give a valid consent for marriage. Here, a man betroths his ten-year-old daughter to his friend; and at times, such girls are deprived of education or training. The persona declares that "When my mother was turning ten, // Her father betrothed her to his friend.//At seventeen she became his third wife. (Veyu *Tender Ties*. 13)

Such a young girl has to live with the effects of early marriage imposed on her by her father and this corroborates Agboatdannon's statement that: "The woman's role has hitherto been canopied to the kitchen and to other chores that are akin to her femininity, while the men do the political talking and decision-making that unfortunately also affect the voiceless woman." (7) This is a situation that Veyu decries.

Unfortunately, when women get old and lose the physical attractiveness they had when they were young girls some men simply abandon them as undesirable. This is evident in the poem "Why I Left" in which the persona leaves his woman because of the changes observed on her body as she gets old. He explains his action thus:

Her breasts became too saggy, you see.  
And more, her lips were too wide, and  
Her derriere, somewhat too flabby, and  
Her face had frown too old, gaunt, and  
Her energy levels had run far too low!  
That is why, - Would you have stayed? (Veyu *This Poem* 15)

This indicates the numerous changes that the woman's looks have witnessed as she ages on. Due to these changes, the persona feels justified to abandon her and rhetorically asks; "Would you have stayed"?

Another instance in which marriage engenders suffering for women is presented in the poem "Married to Air". The poem projects an inattentive husband who spends a lot of happy moments on phone with his friends and even strangers; but does not give his wife similar attention. It is okay for a man to spend time on phone provided he gives attention to his wife too. Unfortunately, that is not the case. It is for that reason that the wife is complaining thus:

"Your best moments are on phone,  
With friends and strangers out there.  
Why doesn't it happen between us"  
"Where did it all go wrong?"  
That was exasperating, yes,  
I felt like no husband, not anymore. (Veyu *Tender Ties* 9-10)

This situation creates a sense of frustration and void in the woman's life as the poet adds that "But that was very frustrating to her – she was married to air! (Veyu *Tender Ties* 10). This metaphor highlights how lonely she feels in her marriage.

Finally, violence towards women is expressed in the poem "The Beast" in which the persona blames himself for being violent to his little girl. He rhetorically asks where the beast that he let loose the previous night had been hidden; and feels bad for having been so hard to a girl he always treated nicely and called his mother. The persona says he and the girl are friends; "But, for a little offence last night, // I went red and wild.// It was not me, really". (Veyu *This Poem* 51)

The fact that the persona is remorseful about his actions is good; but it takes away little from the trauma the little girl could have gone through as a result of his actions.

In this section, the poet presents situations in which women of various ages and marital conditions endure suffering either due to the norms of their societies or as a result of the flaws of the people they interact with. In this regards, referring to women, Agboadannon affirms that: "They live in the shadow of men from their maiden homes to their matrimonial homes; hence they are regarded as second class citizens"(4). Agboadannon's claim that women are second class citizens is exaggerated, but they go through some unique difficulties.. The wellbeing of women is very important in every community; as Muwhati and Zifikile opine that: "Because of the value of womanhood in Africa's development, women's activism and struggles need to be part of the broader effort to rid society of all injustices." (xvii). Thus Veyu projects these challenges so that the unjustifiable acts that pose problems to women can be abandoned.

## **2. Ladies' Unpleasant Accomplishments**

Despite the challenges of women as explained above, they are not infallible. Africana Womanism is different from feminism because it

attributes values or standards of behaviour to women based on African realities and culture; and holds them responsible when they go wrong. Hudson-Weems affirms that: "Africana Womanism is grounded in African culture and, therefore, focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women" (HudsonWeems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Fifth Edition 15). She then gives eighteen principles that should guide women based on African culture as they fight for better lives. When they deviate from these norms, it means that they are going against what is considered acceptable and should be held accountable. This section, therefore, analyses the shortcomings of women as projected by Veyu.

The spendthrift attitude of women is presented in the poem "Tell My Wife". The expression "Tell My Wife" is repeated at the beginning of stanzas to highlight the extravagant ways in which the persona's wife wants them to spend money. The poem reads:

Tell my wife;  
After I have shown her all the money,  
She should kindly stop nagging me,  
With bills she knows I cannot pay. (*Veyu Tender Ties* 21)

This desire to outspend the income is not good for the growth of the family. The woman is therefore going against one of the norms guiding African women as indicated by Hudson-Weems thus: "Ambitious enables one to participate in the economic demands of the family, for more success comes with collectively working together." (*Why Africana Womanism* 11). The wife is not ambitious and her actions are not in the interest of the family. The poem continues as follow:

Tell my wife,  
To cut her wants to suit our income.  
Rather than drive me nuts all the time;  
Wishing that I pay for her mad dreams. (*Veyu Tender Ties* 21)

The persona's wife is self-centred and does not think about the wellbeing of the family as she wants her husband to finance her "mad dreams" at all costs. This is contrary to Hudson-Weems provision that: "Family-Centrality is a major cornerstone of Africana Womanism, as the true Africana womanist is never concerned solely about herself. She must be resolute in placing the family at the center for ultimate human survival"(Why Africana Womanism 8). The persona requests that his wife be told to stop comparing herself to other women and trying to own all what they possess because they do not have the same financial strengths. The poem ends thus:

Tell my wife,  
To stop comparing me to my friends:  
Their cars, houses, costumes, shoes,  
Which, sure, are better than mine.  
Tell my wife,

That I am not the last of men;  
That I am not the poorest of men;  
That I am not the slowest of men. (Veyu *Tender Ties* 21)

This emphasizes the wife's materialistic and nagging attitude as well as the husband's determination to change them for the family's sake.

"My Wife" is another poem in which Veyu projects the nagging attitude of a wife. The wife complains that her husband does not take her out and does not buy her shoes; without realizing that things are more expensive. She further insinuates that he hides money from her and is probably unfaithful to her. The persona resumes his frustrations in the hands of the wife thus: "*I am in trouble with her, for just anything, // Any other man seems to do better than I*". (Veyu *Tender Ties* 27)

He adds that his wife ignores his good deeds. But "She's better at keeping a record of my sins" (Veyu *Tender Ties* 27). He wonders if other wives are nagging and disrespectful like his and rhetorically asks "Do they treat their husbands any differently" (Veyu *Tender Ties* 27)? The wife is erring as Hudson-Weems states that: "Respect must be understood as being reciprocal, which demands that both parties must give the same back to the other." (Why *Africana Womanism* 10). Such acts by women need to change. The extravagance of women is also brought out in the poem "Difference" which presents the contrast between a wife and a husband in their attitudes towards money. The poem reads;

He thought investment,  
She thought enjoyment.  
He stood for "investment before enjoyment"  
She "Eat, drink, make merry, before we die." (Veyu *This Poem* 58)

While the husband wants that they should invest in order to secure a better future, the wife thinks that they should spend what they have in leisure. The wife lacks ambition and according to Hudson-Weems "ambition empowers the whole family" (Why *Africana Womanism* 11). This unthrifty habit of women is also projected in the poem "This Girl"; showing a transfer of the bad habit from one generation to another. The poet says:

She's the kind of girl,  
To leach on you parasitically,  
Ever making demands,  
Reminding, you did not do this, that,  
Nagging about your many failures: (Veyu *This Poem* 24)

Like the woman in "My Wife" above, this girl is nagging and spendthrift. She complains that her man does not call her, does not buy her things; does not have time for her; probably sees other women and does not pick calls on time. She also asks questions about his calls, whereabouts and female acquaintances. Due to these habits, the persona says "Boy it is quite a hell" (Veyu *This Poem* 24). Since nobody wants to live a hellish life, he contemplates leaving as he declares:

You want to run away,  
You want to be free again  
You want to be yourself again  
You want to throw off the load  
You want to break off and breathe. (Veyu *This Poem* 24)

The anaphoric repetition of "You want to" before mentioning various ways of abandoning the relationship suggests that men could run away from girls with such attitudes. If that happens, it will not be easy for women to have families and become mothers which should be the objectives of African women. Hudson-Weems states; "We must commit ourselves to the children as mothers and nurturers in shaping their lives into being responsible Africana people. Their physical and emotional needs are, indeed, of upmost concern" (*Why Africana Womanism* 11). This is necessary for the growth of the family and society at large.

This inability to form a family caused by women is also brought out in "A Little Girl". In this poem, instead of preparing herself for marriage, the little girl is dating a big man who talks too much. The poet says the girl knows every bad thing about everyone in their locality "Because she dates a big man here" (Veyu *This Poem* 19) and the said big man speaks carelessly.

Disrespect associated with women is highlighted in the poem "Near Mr Tamfu's Office" in which a lady exercised pride, arrogance and disrespect to such an extent that she was named "Mami Nyanga", which literally translates as "Proud and Arrogant Woman". This Cameroonian pidgin English expression "Mami Nyanga", and the name "Tamfu" drawn from the Nso community of the North West region of Cameroon the poet hails from, pin Veyu's poetry to the Cameroonian society; and validate to poetry's analysis using Africana Womanism. Unfortunately for her, Mr. Tamfu, her guardian in the workplace, dies. It is at this moment that she realizes the need to be friendly towards others. The poem begins thus:

Mami Nyanga, lady show show,  
Let us see what she will do now.  
Since the death, some days ago,  
She's trying to be friendly, Nyango ( Veyu *The Return* 24)

Pride and arrogance are negative attitudes in the African context as respect and humility are held high. Hudson-Weems advises women to be respectful thus: "Respectful of Elders, much needed today, is a love & appreciation for those who came before us. [...] Insist upon this for the beauty and strength of our communities. And the legacy continues" (*Why Africana Womanism* 10)! This is a key element in most African cultures and needs to be held in high esteem.

Veyu also satirizes the indecent dressing of some women in the poem "Our Choir Mistress". The poet uses situational irony to project an instance in which a choir master is indecently dressed when she goes to church. The poem reveals that:

Our choir mistress  
Has such big boobs  
Which are, often,  
Only half covered. (Veyu *This Poem* 27)

The choir mistress does not show a good example by covering her big breasts fully. The poet says she has a tendency of often exposing half of her breasts; and this is quite ironical given that she is a leader in church. Partially exposing her breasts is bad but the poet indicates that:

This Sunday, especially,  
She had them all out.  
[...]  
It was a cabaret,  
In this holy place. (Veyu *This Poem*. 27)

The metaphorical juxtaposition of the cabaret where people usually dress indecently and the church where proper dressing is a norm, exposes the degree of moral decadence associated with the choir mistress' act. She evidently lacks the spirituality that has to guide women's actions according to Hudson-Weems who opines that: "Spirituality means having a sacred belief in a higher being or power—God, Our Father, & Son Jesus Christ. God must come 1st in our lives, for He is the Maker, the Creator of the whole universe." (Why Africana Womanism 10). Spirituality of all dimensions is very vital in African communities and should be upheld.

The refusal of some women to accept polygamy is also presented in the poem "What If Some Day". It should be noted that many African cultures are open to polygamy; though they do not condemn monogamy. The poem opens as follows:

What if some day,  
In the coming days,  
Monogamous wives,  
Thought of their single sisters,  
And opened their homes to these? (Veyu *Tender Ties* 16)

In this rhetorical question, the poet is presents wives who refuse polygamy as being selfish because they do not think about single women who may want polygamy. The poet wonders if the church can change its ways and be tolerant to polygamy which is accepted in African cultures. He urges the women to desist from egoism and accept cohabitation with co-wives in polygamy. This goes in line with Hudson-Weems' proclamation that "Adaptable simple means that one is flexible and able to adjust to the demands for that moment. No need for "a room of one's own," as Virginia Woolf calls for in order to realize success." (Why Africana Womanism 10). Polygamy has always been practiced in Africa. The poet nostalgically wonders how great it will be if: "Our past polygamous ways, // Regained their long lost glories?" (Veyu *Tender Ties* 16)

If this rhetorical question finds a favourable outcome, Africans will be genuine as polygamy is in their cultures and culture makes people real.

Hudson-Weems corroborates thus: "Authenticity is to be culturally connected. It is key to live an authentic existence, as happiness and success come once we love ourselves as a people and our culture"(Why Africana Womanism 9)! African women therefore need to accept this cultural uniqueness of theirs.

Lastly, the false accusation of men by women of sexual harassment is satirized in the poems "Those Days, These Days" and "The Laws". These poems condemn the destruction of the beauty of seduction by women who accuse insistent men of sexual harassment. The poem "Those Days, These Days" contrasts wooing in the past and present thus;

In those days,  
You proved your seriousness,  
By perseverance and insistence.  
But these days,  
If she says no at first,  
Further steps are called harassment. (*Veyu Tender Ties* 17)

While not encouraging sexual harassment, the poet indicates that women should not consider persistence as harassment as it contradicts the spirit of compatibility wherein African women are encouraged to pair up with men, and not women, for posterity. Hudson-Weems affirms that "Male Compatibility demonstrates the natural attraction to the male counterpart on the part of the female, without which the human race, as we know it, will become extinct"(Why Africana Womanism 10). Thus, without encouraging harassment, women are required to be more tolerant.

These days, Veyu indicates that "Things have changed" (*Veyu Tender Ties*. 17) and "Out of fear of the laws" (*Veyu Tender Ties* 17), men no longer take the initiative to woo women and rather wait for them to make the first move. The poet fears "How really frightful the future seems". (*Veyu Tender Ties* 17) and wonders what shape human and family relations will take.

The poem "The Laws" raises a similar worry. Women declare anything they do not like as harassment. Some of these include jokes, unwanted advances, insistence, change of mind after her acceptance, some compliments and turning down her advances. The poem begins as follows:

The laws and the restrictions,  
Are killing the life of the game.  
Why? Because harassment is:  
Anything a woman does not like. (*Veyu Tender Ties* 28)

Such a situation is very daunting to men who prefer to avoid women as the poet says "Many a man now tiptoes away" (*Veyu Tender Ties* 28); since they do not know how a woman would react to their advances. The poem ends as follows; "Most men now pray in the morning://Lead us not //unto any tempting woman,//Deliver us from harassment accusations". (*Veyu Tender Ties* 28)

By laying endless emphasis on the protection of women thereby incriminating men even for advances that are not harmful, today's society is disrupting the social order of existence. Hudson-Weems hints to this when she declares that: "What is the relationship between an Africana woman and her family, her community, and her career in today's society that [selfishly] emphasizes, in the midst of oppression, human suffering, and death, the empowerment of women and individualism over human dignity and rights" (Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* 10)? Therefore, the emancipation of women should be done inclusively.

Women are the authors of some acts that are considered abnormal, and have the ability to affect society and mankind negatively. The poet presents these shortcomings of women so that they can be corrected for the betterment of women and their communities. This is because if African women go against African values, they need to be reprimanded. Veyu resumes his criticism of women's actions in the poem "Woemen" in which he indicates that men sell their kingdoms, commit murder, destroy cities, indulge in rape, deny priestly vows and ruin their lives "Just for you, Woemen" (*Veyu Tender Ties* 46)! Thus women are a woe to men and this ties with Africana Womanism as the theory brings out negative aspects of women.

### **3. Valorization of the Female Folk**

Human beings of all genders, ages and walks of life always try collectively and/or individually to improve their conditions in life. The emancipation of women is one of those collective efforts and this part of the work examines the manner in which Ernest Veyu presents it. It is more difficult for women to ameliorate their situations on their own than when they are accompanied by men. Sharing this point of view, Hudson-Weems states that: "In Concert with the Male in the Liberation Struggle is a mandate for the survival of our families and our communities." (*Why Africana Womanism* 9). The enhancement of the status of a woman with the support of a man is highlighted in the poem "To Christine" which begins as follows:

As you labour in school for your professional needs,  
And at home to take care of our wonderful kids,  
Never forget that next only to Jesus,  
There is a guy here, 100% in support of your labour.  
(Veyu *This Poem* 14)

The persona is addressing his wife with words of encouragement. She is being motivated to work hard in school in order to do better professionally. This corroborates Hudson-Weems' affirmation that "Ambitious enables one to participate in the economic demands of the family, for more success comes with collectively working together." (*Why*

Africana Womanism 11). The need to work together to achieve set goals is projected here.

The poem strikes a balance between a woman's education and career; and her role as a wife and mother. True emancipation is when women handle their educational and/or professional demands together with their family duties. Hudson-Weems prescribes it thus: "Flexible Role Player demonstrates comfort in the home place with family, and the workplace, not sacrificing either role in our quest for fulfillment"(Why Africana Womanism 9). Women are encouraged to continue performing their roles in the family while pursuing their careers or businesses.

In order to achieve this emancipation, women need to be encouraged. That is why the persona motivates the lady never to give up if things difficult. He inspires her to keep on working even when she is exhausted and feels like quitting; because he is giving her all support. The poem states:

It is true; sometimes you feel like quitting it all.  
And everybody and everything else are a vexing lot.  
But never you forget that victory is very near, and  
There is a guy here, 100% in support of your labour.  
(Veyu *This Poem* 14)

The repetition of "There is a guy here, 100% in support of your labour" shows the husband's determination to support his wife in her education and career. He tells her to keep working hard because soon she will return to him; and a few years later she will marvel her wonderful kids.

The support men give women in education is equally presented in the poem "This Poem". In it a woman expresses the encouragement she got from her man as she was going to write an exam. She indicates that:

He called me,  
Looked into my eyes;  
The most tender smile ever,  
And lovingly said, "Write well". (Veyu *This Poem* 1)

Although the lady says "I failed the exam" (Veyu *This Poem* 1), it takes nothing away from her man's support; which indicates that men can be involved in women's emancipation.

The enhancing of women's status through education is equally projected in "Still Waiting and Praying". In this poem, there is contrast between the past and present that show the amelioration of women's status. The persona indicates that when her mother was seventeen years old, she got married as a third wife having been betrothed at ten years old. Things have changed such that at seventeen, unlike her mother, she was a student in the university. She indicates that:

When my mother was turning ten,  
Her father betrothed her to his friend.  
At seventeen she became his third wife.

At seventeen I was going to the university,  
Dreaming about degrees and professions.  
Marriage was not an issue to consider, then. (Veyu *Tender Ties* 13)

This contrast between the persona and her mother, at the same age, implies that some progress has been made in reducing child marriages, early marriages and school abandonment for young girls. Such progress then needs to be consolidated so that women have the opportunity to grow, go to school and empower themselves intellectually and/or professionally before getting married.

Another poem that illustrates the support given to women is "On Behalf of the Nso Family in Yaounde" which shows how the Nso community in Yaounde supports Pa Tamfu's wife after his death. The support is spearheaded by a male leader who tells the widow that:

"Our mother, look at all these people,  
Who have come to cry with you,  
And then divide the tears in your heart,  
By the numbers you have here.  
It is our calamity, all of us. (Veyu *The Return* 32-33)

After announcing their support by stating that the widow and her children "Can always count on us", the persona adds that they have planned for a huge delegation to accompany her to the village for burial. This indicates that women's plights should be handled collectively.

The leadership qualities of women are highlighted in "When she's not around". In this poem, the persona projects women as leaders of their homes by insinuating that his female companion organizes the house very orderly and nobody can put disorder in the house when she is around. Anybody can afford to mess around only when she is absent as he reveals that:

When she's not around,  
I can be myself;  
Putting books on the bed,  
Leaving dirty plates around,  
Making my laptop a bed mate, (Veyu *This Poem* 16)

The man cannot put the house in disarray by placing books on the bed, leaving unwashed dishes around or working with his laptop on the bed when the female partner is around. This indicates that women are better leaders and coordinators of households than men.

Veyu also shows the emancipation of women in the poem "Now, We Too Can Choose" which shows the contrast between the past and the present regarding wooing. The poem indicates that unlike the past when only men could approach women, women can now actively seduce men, propose to them or even ask for their hands in marriage. The poem reads:

Now, we too can choose;

going up and proposing,  
Or asking a man's hand.  
Now, we too can speak, (Veyu *Tender Ties* 19)

Approaching someone for a date or marriage was initially done by men almost exclusively. Now, things have changed and women can do it without looking strange. That is why the poet encourages them to be more active in choosing and approaching men by stating that:

After a margin life,  
This is the time, at long last!  
New horizons,  
Great expectations!  
Arise, you women!  
New centres, create.  
Ascend, go forth, fly!!! (Veyu *Tender Ties* 19)

This encouragement gives women the power to actively choose whom to date or marry; and not just passively choosing from those who have indicated an interest in her. This contradicts Agboadannon's declaration that: "Patriarchal practices shape and perpetuate gender inequalities and strip women of any form of control or decision in society"(5). The poem is not only talking about women being the first to indicate interest in relationships because "New centres, create, Ascend, go forth, fly" cannot only be referring to approaching men first. It is talking about new vistas women are opened to in emancipation, approaching men first is just one of such.

Women are vindicated in "Unchanging Husbands". The poem discloses the expectations men have of their wives; when they themselves live below such standards. The husband expects the wife to know him; to identify what he likes and dislikes; and to tune herself to those realities. If she does not change, she is a bad wife. The poet blasts men who expect women to change and fit their lifestyles when they themselves have not changed for women. The poem states:

Like the bird that never learnt,  
I have been a tetchy, crabby fool,  
The fool with the many men out there,  
Complaining, cursing, getting angry and  
Unchanging about their unchanging wives. (Veyu *This Poem* 21)

When the persona, in a simile, compares himself and men like him to a bird that never learns, it indicates a collective perception men have of women having to change their ways to accommodate their husbands while the husbands themselves do nothing similar.

Closely linked to this, the attitude and beauty of women is celebrated in the poem "She" in which the poet praises the inner and outward beauty of a lady. The poem reads:

She was beautiful, And knew she was.  
She did not boast; She didn't need to.  
[...]  
In her magnanimity and grace,  
Inner beauty met the outward. (*Veyu Tender Ties* 25)

The lady is beautiful and is not arrogant about her looks despite knowing how aesthetic she is. In addition, her character and conduct correlate her physical attractiveness making her sublime.

The need to pamper women is seen in the poem "Baby" in which the woman starts crying because the partner does not want her to call him "baby". The man asks for forgiveness thus: "Whenever she got to this, I'll have to beg, beg, // Calling her baby, honey, sugar, stupid names! // And make promises she knew I won't ever keep". (*Veyu Tender Ties* 6-7)

In a bid to be pardoned, the man even makes promises he and the lady know he cannot fulfill. This is to show the worth of a woman and the need not to make her feel bad.

The poet presents the valorization of women through different ways such as education, career, freedom, leadership, good behavior and beautification. In any of these, women are encouraged by men and/or their communities. Such acts are worth consolidation.

## **Conclusion**

Ernest Veyu's vision of the woman's status in his selected poems is multidimensional; but generally favours the amelioration and consolidation of women's progress. The poet presents instances in which ladies are maltreated so that such acts should be abandoned. He equally highlights circumstances wherein women have been emancipated and are in full control not only of themselves but also of their families and communities. Such achievements need to be consolidated and improved upon. Since women are not infallible and can pose acts that are detrimental to themselves and their families as well as societies, the poet outlines instances in which women carry out acts that are considered wrong; based on the norms of their societies. This is in line with Agboadannon's affirmation that "Given the fact that culture is a beam of values which make some people, it follows that any plans of action implemented in the purpose of ensuring the development of those societies must have inherent connection with culture" (4). The emancipation of African women cannot be achieved without considering aspects of African cultures and consequently the acts of women that are considered deviant need to be corrected for the progress of women and their communities at large. It can be said that Veyu's perspective of women's emancipation is anchored on African cultural realities.

## Works Cited

- ACHEBE, Chinua. *Morning yet on Creation Day*. New York: Anchor, 1975.
- "Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays", New York, Anchor, 2012
- AGBOADANNON, Koumagnon Alfred Djossou. *African Women's Empowerment: a Study in Amma Darko's Selected Novels*. Université du Maine; Université d'Abomey-Calavi/Bénin, 2018.
- ARNDT, Susan. *The Dynamics of African Feminism Defining and Classifying African-Feminist Literatures*, translated by Isabel Cole, Asmara-Eritrea, African World Press Inc, 2001.
- HILL, Patricia Liggins, et al, eds. *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.
- HUDSON-WEEMS, Clenora. "Africana Womanism and the Critical Need for Africana Theory and Thought" in *The Western Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 21, No.2, 1997, pp. 79-84
- "Africana Womanism: Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison as Model Africana Womanist Activist for Social Justice", Keynote Speaker, <https://english.missouri.edu/sites/default/files/people-files/africana-womanism2.pdf>, retrieved on 30<sup>th</sup> July 2023 at 7:37pm
- Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Fifth Edition. London and New York: Routledge Press, 2019.
- "Opening Keynote Address—Why Africana Womanism? Authenticity & Collectivity for Social Justice" Keynote Speaker, University of Zimbabwe 2021 International Conference on Women, a Continuum of its 1<sup>st</sup> International Africana Womanism Conference in 2010 <https://english.missouri.edu/sites/default/files/people-files/africana-womanism-u.z.keynote-address.pdf>, retrieved on 30<sup>th</sup> July 2023 at 7:52pm
- MADONDO, Gracious. "Why Africa Relate to Africana Womanism" in *The Southern Times: The Newspaper for Southern Africa*, July 19, 2018.
- MUWHATI, Itia, and Zifikile Mguni. Introduction in *Rediscovering African Womanhood in the Search for Sustainable Renaissance: Africana Womanism in Mutidisciplinary Approaches*. Harara, Zimbabwe: College Press, 2012
- RAVELL-PINTO, Thelma. Interview: "Buchi Emecheta at Spelman College" *Sage*. Vol. 2, No. 1. 1985, pp. 50-51.
- SEPHODI, Malebo, *Miss Behave*, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/african-feminism>, Consulted on August, 2<sup>nd</sup> 2023 at 4:56pm
- VEYU, Ernest, *This Poem and Other Poems* Kansas City, Miraclaire Publishing, 2021.
- *The Return: Poems, a Poem* Kansas City. Miraclaire Publishing, 2022.
- *Tender Ties* Kansas City, Miraclaire Publishing 2022.