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VIRGINIA WOOLF'S TO THE LIGHTHOUSE AS A NOVEL FROM A POET'S PEN: A CRITICAL STUDY

Dr. MOHAMMAD SHAUKAT ANSARI

Associate Professor of English
MLSM College, (L.N. Mithila University), Darbhanga, Bihar
Email – shaukata12@yahoo.com
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Dr. MOHAMMAD SHAUKAT
ANSARI

ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf's style is exquisitely poetic. The elucidation of experience dissolved into fleeting glimpses is considerably so organized in her narrative transmission that it assumes the form of lyric poetry. She employs words in a way which may be regarded as magnificently poetic. The metaphors, she engages in texts linger long in the memory after the purpose which they serve in the novel has been forgotten.

A lyric is the expression of personal emotions. It is subjective; it has emotional intensity; it is musical and is built round a single mood, emotion or impression. The present study aims to trace and examine the characteristic elements of poetic style in Virginia Woolf's novels in general and in her celebrated *To the Lighthouse* in particular. The study intends to explore and purport the fact that Woolf is a par-excellent prose lyricist, and this reality is the manifestation of her formidable passion to coin and devise innovative narration style and technical artistry which make her works, especially *To the Lighthouse* poetic and rhythmic powerhouse with intensity of feelings.

Keywords: aesthetic, beauty, emotion, experience, image, lyricism, narrative, metaphor, musicality, refrains, rhythm, transience, to the lighthouse, stream-of-consciousness technique, Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf is considered to be one of the greatest twentieth century novelists and short story writers with acuity and one of the pioneers, among modernist writers applying and enforcing stream of consciousness as a meticulous narrative device. She has been hailed as a prospector into new territory of the novel (David Daiches, p.79) [1]

As in the poetic drama of T.S. Eliot, so in the novels of Mrs. Virginia Woolf, there is a double pattern – a poetic pattern and a prose pattern. It means that her novels convey two kinds of experience, one on the level of prose and the other on the level of poetry. Woolf's peculiarities as a

fiction writer have tended to obscure her central strength. She is arguably the major lyrical novelist in the English language. Her novels are highly experimental: a narrative, frequently uneventful and commonplace, is refracted—and sometimes almost dissolved—in the characters' receptive consciousness. Intense lyricism and stylistic virtuosity fuse to create a world overabundant with scintillating auditory and visual impressions. "The intensity of Virginia Woolf's poetic vision elevates the ordinary, sometimes banal settings"—often wartime environments—"of most of her novels" (McTaggart, Ursula) [2].

Novelists like Henry James, James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, by making the novel extremely psychological in nature, give eliciting and careful thought to the aesthetics of the novel, and propound their own theories that narration, description, portrayal and style must satisfy high and exacting technical standards. Under the influence of new psychological theories, they do not regard life as a continuous flow, but as a series of separate and successive moments. Hence they concentrate on a particular psychological moment or experience; instead of telling a story with an eye on the clock and the calendar, they probe deeper and deeper into the human consciousness and move freely backward and forward in time.

Virginia Woolf increasingly acquired mastery over her craft, and achieved complete success in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. These are her supreme achievements wherein she “advanced the frontiers of the English novel by the mastery of a new and potentially fruitful technique; and so in the list of great novelists, she will find a place perhaps not without honour.” (R.L. Chambers, p.57) [3]

A. Woolf's augmentative poetic style

Virginia Woolf's style is exquisitely poetic. The elaboration of insightful experience, dissolved into fleeting glimpses is so organized that it is propelled to carry forward the form of lyric poetry. She carves out words in a way which may be regarded as magnificently poetic. The metaphors, she captures linger long in the memory after the purpose which they serve in the novel has been forgotten. In the long meandering simile of the body lying in the sun on the beach she seems to live half in and half out in the world of metaphor. Her metaphors in the novels evoke in such stupendous ways that we discover in poetry more vivid and startling than the metaphors of ordinary prose. For instance, “a great brush swept across through his mind like the pulse of a perfect heart of life struck straight through the street; then for that moment she had illumination: a match burning in a crocus, an inner meaning almost expressed”. These images are poetic of the type as “A bracelet of bright hair about the bone” or “I should have been a pair of ragged

claws,” and cannot be said to belong to prose, “Life striking through London like the pulse of a heart, such an image one does not expect in a work of prose”. Her images are all drawn from the visible world. Her allusions and images, rhythms, refrains and metaphors, all of them join together to make her style poetic.

B. Woolf's technique as prose-lyricist

It is a multi-dimensional estimation that **Woolf's novels are prose-lyrics from the pen of a poet** with dashing subjectivity. The form and substance of Mrs. Woolf's novels, as it has been contended by Joan Bennett [4], are more akin to those of lyric poetry. A lyric is an expression of personal emotion. It is subjective, it contains emotional intensity, it is musical and is constructed round a single mood, emotion and impression. The first aim of Woolf's style, as a matter of fact, is to bring out convincingly the rhythmic movements within the consciousness or the rhythm of the streaming of the consciousness, as a response to an external stimulus.

Woolf's technique is to bring together a limited number of human beings within a narrow mechanism of time and place but the readers are made continually conscious of wider horizons in the background. The experience of love and the experience of death are prodded as part of the pattern of human life. Neither is seen as a conclusion or climax and so she is able to show the incalculable variety with which a single event or relationship is experienced. The framework is narrow, but vast vistas of time and space are opened out as the consciousness of some one or the other character moves backward and forward both in space and time. Thus there is a combination of lyric intensity with the vastness and expansiveness proper to a novel. Intensity and also variety is further imparted by bringing together the opposites of love. Thus her novels earnestly present the love-hate, beauty-ugliness, life-death, action-contemplation, misery-happiness, anti-thesis, and the tension between these opposites results in intensity. The manifold variety of the experience of living is thus conveyed with all the intensity proper to lyric. “Mrs. Woolf's novels combine the structural

integration and concentration of a lyric with the expansiveness of a novel. They are prose-poems writ large." (Raghukul Tilak, pp. 37-38) [5]

With Virginia Woolf's distinctive use of the stream of consciousness technique, the reader can accomplish his task following the characters' flows of thought in time more easily. Not only thematic analysis but also the linguistic analysis is beneficial to make it easy to understand and to teach. Seeing on the canvas of the vocabulary, the sentence structure used by Virginia Woolf is not a coincidence, it is always fascinating. Woolf supports her artistry using some special structures creating poetic effect as a result of the rhythm and balance in her writing. First of all, the structures of balance in her writing help her produce a dramatic effect on the reader. In addition, the application of asyndeton structure in various manners renders a kind of movement to the narrative of the novel. The words, the sentences are also in a flow like the minds of characters. Particularly when asyndeton is used in short sentences, it beautifully accelerates the pace of narrative.

In this study, I aim to focus on Woolf's technical artistry in *To the Lighthouse* that encompasses poetic and rhythmic traits as well as engaging visual and auditory features too. In this study, I also aim to investigate the fact that underlying such features makes the stream of consciousness technique comprehensible, and also helps to creatively focus on the linguistic and thematic analyses of the stream of consciousness technique.

C. Woolf's propensity for beauty

Virginia is undoubtedly a great lover of beauty and this love of beauty guides her in her selection and ordering of reality. According to David Cecil [6], Virginia Woolf could find beauty "as much in a scrap of orange peel lying in the gutter as in the Venus de Melo; as easily walking down the Huston Road as within the consecrated portals of the National Gallery." There is nothing languid or academic about her aestheticism casual and zestful, it is the expression of an intense vitality, as, home in the bustle and clamour of the modern age, inspired by no fatigued desire to escape from a present, that

is too much for her, into the safe calm of a dead past. As presented by her, the aesthetic life is massively vigorous and satisfying as any other kind of life. And for us too, while we are reading her books, as long as their spell is on us we do not bother about the limitations of her vision. Indeed these are seen to be a necessary condition of her success. In order to concentrate our eyes on the aesthetic aspects of experience, she has to exclude its other aspects. And they seem more beautiful for being thus isolated...what a relief for once in a way, freed from the claims of heart and conscience, to concentrate on the mere spectacle of a world so brimful of strangeness and fascination and delight. Again the emphasis on the aesthetic aspect of life makes her novels contemplative, for aesthetic experiences are a chain of contemplative affairs.

Mrs. Woolf represents the poetisation and musicalisation of the English novel. She realized that the "very atmosphere of mind", the chaotic welter of sensations and emotions that the human mind is, cannot be recreated with the ordinary resources of prose. Therefore, in order to enrich her language, she used vivid metaphors and symbols which are peculiar to poetry. Her language is the language of poetry, her prose-style has the assonances, the refrains, the rhythms, and the accents of poetry itself. Her novels have the intensity and immediacy of a lyric, and this intensity is achieved by providing them with a narrow framework. Her novels are an expression of the "summerines of life", of the very sensation of living as a great poetry always is. They are composed like a musical symphony, the apparently discordant notes within them forming a single harmony.

D. To the Lighthouse

Since the publication of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* in 1927, a significant volume of critical commentaries has grown to surround the work. These critical interpretations come in two types: some consider Woolf's technical experiments in style and form; [7] others consider her ideology. The reputation of this novel can be gauged with the fact that in 1998, The Modern Library named *To the Lighthouse* No.15 on its list of the 100 best English language novels of the 20th century.[8] In 2005, the

novel was chosen by TIME magazine as one of the one hundred best English language novels since 1923. [9]

In this novel, Virginia Woolf takes a group of characters on holiday on an island in the Hebrides and uses the setting – very different from the teeming London of *Mrs. Dalloway* – to help her to arrange the characters into symbolic relations with each other and to the landscape. [10]

The novel exposes greater maturity and even greater command over technique. It is a unique work of art and there is nothing second-hand about this novel. The convention in which it is written permits the novelist to convey with wonderful precision a certain intimate quality of felt life. The novel represents a perfect compromise between the need for formal clarity and the requirements of the 'stream of consciousness' technique. In this outstanding novel, the 'stream of consciousness' method attains a balance which it had hitherto seemed to lack. That is why David Daiches, [11] an English scholar and literary critic justly remarks: "To the *Lighthouse* is a work in which plot, locale and treatment are so carefully bound up with each other that the resulting whole is more finely organised and more effective than anything else Virginia Woolf wrote." To the *Lighthouse* is genuinely a piece of literature "which belongs to the literary genre of modernism and which shares with *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves* the climax of the novelist's creative powers" (A.N. Subramanayam, 103) [12]. The whole novel is divided into three parts. Part 1, "The Window", describes a house-party on the island of Skye. Prof. Ramsay and his wife are on holiday with their children and some friends. They have promised to take their youngest son James to see a lighthouse. The father predicts unsuitable weather conditions and the journey is postponed. Part 2, "Time Passes" elaborates how during the long years of war the house is left to dust and silence and loneliness. Then the family, without Mrs. Ramsay and two of the children, returns. Part 3 "The Lighthouse" describes the visit to the lighthouse after the passing of the years. The quiet, efficient and thoughtful personality of Mrs. Ramsay has a similar position in this novel to that of Clarissa Dalloway in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

1. Narration and perception

Unlike James Joyce's stream of consciousness technique, Woolf does not tend to use abrupt fragments to represent character's thought processes; her method is more one of lyrical paraphrase. The lack of an omniscient narrator means that, throughout the novel, no vivid guide exists for the reader and that only through character development the readers formulate their own opinions because much is ambiguous.

Whereas in Part 1, the novel is concerned with illustrating the relationship between the character experiencing and the actual experience and surroundings, part 2, Time Passes having no characters to relate to, presents events differently. Instead, Woolf wrote the section from the perspective of a displaced narrator, unrelated to any people, intending that events be seen in relation to time. For that reason the narrating voice is unfocused and distorted, providing an example of what Woolf called 'life as it is when we have no part in it.' [13] Major events like deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Prue, Andrew are related parenthetically, which make the narration a kind of journal-entry. It is also possible that the house itself is the inanimate narrator of these events.

2. Virginia Woolf's style is of a born poet and To the Lighthouse

The prose style of Virginia Woolf is the style of a born poet. It is a poetic style and abounds in poetic rhythms, refrains, repetitions and poetic imagery. Ordinary prose is inadequate to express inner mental states with its inner atmosphere, and this is what she intends to convey, and this can best be communicated through the poetic means. She uses rich and vivid metaphors and symbols which carry a complex atmosphere of associations and emotions. Her language is poetic and expressive and the metaphors, used are often more vivid and startling than the metaphors of normal prose." Her style is extremely allusive and suggest much more. Her words are full of suggestions than they really connote. Like the refrain of a song, words and phrases are repeated, which linger long in memory. Assonance and the device of echoing sounds and significant words are common. Poetic refrains,

rhymes, assonances, rhythms and cadences are what make Virginia Woolf's style as musical. As R.L. Chambers aptly states: "What Mrs. Woolf does is to borrow the technique of poetry to enlarge the possibilities of expression in prose, at one and the same time to make clear meaning and drive its emotional implications."(p.54) [14]

3. The lyrical nature of time passes

Jean Guiget [15] correctly points out that there is a definite, well marked lyric element in *To the Lighthouse* which is particularly noticeable in its poetic prose, in its poetic images and symbols and second part of the novel, "Time Passes". When the chapter, "Time Passes" is compared with the opening chapter of *Orlando* (another of Virginia Woolf's novels) we find that both treat of her favorite them shade and other cosmic elements are conceived of as mysterious powers, as an army of spirits attacking objects one by one to corrode them, transform them and disintegrate them. The vision that is thrown before the gaze is of man and his world, on the one hand, and the elfin army, unseen and immeasurable on the other. This is the kind of vision which exists in an identical form in both of them.

Lyricism is personal or subjective. It is, in this part of novel, genuine with lyrical qualities. Here we have no character, no individual consciousness, no voice uttering the poetic words. We get commissioned to a scene of life following its course without any spectators and independent of any living being. If we interpret lyricism as the expression of exalted feelings, Time Passes might not be called lyrical. The existence of one individual consciousness is just a device for the emotions of love, anguish and no stalgia, which constitute the real content of the poem. Virginia Woolf does away with it in her novels and it is not surprising either, for it follows as a sequel from her principles. Woolf's lyricism is of a different sort from the common rut, as it makes an attempt to render directly without the aid of an intermediary of Andy individual experience, the relations of man and the universe and they are present in their most elementary form consequently in her novels. Woolf's lyricism, in special, gets emboldened and enriched with the

hands of Woolf in a most enchanting manner in her *To the Lighthouse*, and this style has widely been recognised to be poetic prose. "And this poetical character of her style is in evidence in the superb lyrical nature of the second part of this great novel entitled, "Time Passes." [16]

In fact, *To the Lighthouse* showcases Woolf's lyricism in a superb manner and "Time Passes" has been described by the novelist herself as particularly representative of her lyric vein.

4. Questions of change and permanence of life

Virginia Woolf believes that a novelist should not be the slave of the words. For her, the task of a novelist is to delineate and project life as in the real world. To address this objective of a novelist, she chooses to play on the words in poetic manners. The darkness dims so soon; and so soon a bird sings, a cock crows, or a faint green quickens, like a turning leaf, in the hollow of the wave. Night, however, succeeds to night. The winter holds pack of them in nostalgic store and deals with them equally, with indefatigable fingers. They lengthen, they darken:

"The house was left; the house was deserted. It was left like a shell on sand hill to fill with dry salt grains now that life had left it. The long night seemed to have triumphed. The saucepan had rusted and the mat decayed. Toads had moved their way in idly, aimlessly, the swaying shawl swung to and fro." (*To the Lighthouse*)

In this passage, no verb either stands alone or modified by an adverb, which shows that there is no possibility or a change anywhere. The colours and texture undergo changes, as has been suggested, but night, house, wave, the breeze, the shawl and the saucepan suggest their enduring nature in the midst of physical changes which are being brought about as time is passing on. What the senses perceive is just a means to express the invisible, the indescribable and what is contained within it, what we perceive, seems to pass away, but what lies behind the appearance remains and it is the only reality. The images and sensations merge together in the synthesis of an inner landscape; have

a visual as well as lyrical significance, which really makes them linger in the memory.

Woolf's vision of life makes her lay stress on the fluidity of human personality rather than its fixity. For her, it is the subjective element that is all important.

5. Woolf's imaginative thoughts

In her efforts to visualize the thoughts streaming forth within the consciousness of her characters, Virginia Woolf often becomes herself very imaginative and extremely lyrical. For example, in *To the Lighthouse*, Time Passes, there is the poet Carmichael, a friend of the Ramsays, who has returned to their residence. As he goes to sleep, blowing out the candle, past midnight, his mind involuntarily starts reflecting –

“But what after all is one night? A short space especially when the darkness dims so soon, and so soon a bird sings, a clock crows, or a faint green quickens, like a turning leaf, in the hollow of the wave. Night, however succeeds no night. The winter holds a pack of them in store and deals them equally, evenly, with indefatigable fingers. They lengthen; they darken. Some of them hold aloft clear planets, plates of brightness. The autumn trees, ravaged as they are, take on the flash of tattered flags kindling in the gloom of cool cathedral caves where gold letters on marble pages describe death in battle and how bones bleach and burn far away | the harvest of moons, the light which mellows the energy of labour, and smooths the stubble, and brings the wave lapping blue to the shore.” (*To the Lighthouse*, p.198) [17]

As Carmichael's mind enters into the realm of sleep, his awareness fades slowly into “the gloom of cool cathedral caves where gold letters on marble-pages describe death in battle and how bones bleach and burn far away...” It is like Keats's mind moving away along with the Nightingale whose music set, in motion his own “stream of consciousness”, moving away to the magic

casement, opening on the foam of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn.” Carmichael's consciousness fades into the magic casement of the subconscious, or as he feels the vision of “the gloom of cool cathedral caves” with their own marble carvings of old battle scenes. The novelist here turns into a poet carried away by her visions – rather by the visions of her characters and **the prose becomes highly charged with poetic rhythm.**

6. Poetic level

On the poetic plane, the lighthouse is a poetic symbol with an uncircumscribed power of suggestion. For the readers, as for Mrs. Ramsay, the alternating light and shadow of the lighthouse beam symbolizes the rhythm of joy and sorrow in human life and the alternating radiance and darkness of even the most intimate human relationships.

“She looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her, which had her at its beck and call (she woke in the night and saw it bent across her bed, stroking the floor), but for all that, she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotized, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more bright, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and ways of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, it is enough; it is enough.” (*To the Lighthouse*, p.72) [18]

The three-tier structure of the novel itself reproduces the effect of the lighthouse beam, the long flash represented by the first movement (The Window), the interval of darkness presented by the second movement (Time Passes), and the second and short flash by the last movement (The Lighthouse). When this particular aspect of the novel is taken into reflective account, the subject is no longer a definite group of human beings; it is life

and death, joy and pain. More specifically two themes stand out, the isolation of the individual human spirit and the contrast between the disordered and fragmentary experience of living and the ideal truth or beauty which the human mind aspires.

7. Poetic but accurate description

Extremely sensitive and observant, Woolf combines beauty with accuracy. She creates her effects not by casting a haze of romantic glamour over her picture, but merely by indicating the beautiful aspects of a scene. Her Bond Street is still Bond Street, it is made to look beautiful merely because the novelist has pointed our attention to its beautiful aspects. For example, she describes the flower shop in Bond Street and mentions the real hands of the florist to add a ravishing note of colour. The account of the florist's hands – "they looked as if they had stood in water along with the plants," is a fine example the way in which she adds humour to her delineations of beauty.

8. Transience of life and beauty

Virginia Woolf is adequately conscious of the frailty of life and transience of beauty. This fleeting and changing life makes her sad and melancholy. The fact of beauty, on the one hand, the fact of mutability, on the other, these are the two Poles on which her ornamental panorama of human experience revolves. In *To the Lighthouse* she seems to suggest that there is a permanent principle of beauty at work in the universe behind the visible and the palpable. But, in fact, the vision which permeates most of her books is that of a life so beautiful yet so sad and melancholy."**[19]**

The jumps, backwards and forwards, in *To the Lighthouse* give us a familiar sensation of life sprawling and spreading.

9. Poetical and musical words

The words in the two passages quoted above are poetical and musical. The night, the wave, the grain of salt, the wind, the toad and the rust are the agents of decay and destruction and as against them or opposed to them are the foresees of time or eternity, struggling against the forces of life, the

bird, the leaf, the house and the shawl. Such passages grow into the dimensions of abstraction imperceptibly and the words, ruin, corruption, oblivion, insensibility of nature, that follow are associated with other images and sensations which take on a fresh life as it were. The thing perceived is meditated upon without obliterating it, on the contrary it is constantly remembered in this process of meditation. Words are used to invoke and answer one another from one paragraph to another and in so doing they rouse distant echoes from the further horizons of the novel. They are musical in tone, which arguments their incantatory power. The result is purple patches, rich copious and artistic descriptions.

E. Conclusion

"To treat life in the spirit of art, is to make life a thing in which means and ends are identified to encourage such treatment, the true moral significance of art and poetry," reiterates Walter Pater. Aestheticism means the pursuit of beauty through the medium of art. So the pursuit of art becomes an end in itself. Virginia Woolf also thinks the novel to be a means to the lofty end. In *To the Lighthouse* she found a subject that enabled her to do full justice to her technique, especially her poetic style. **[20]** Woolf has poetry and subtlety as her notable characteristics, "and both are the result of sensibilities which connect the inner life with external manifestations, especially the manifestations of impersonal nature."**[21]**

To sum up, the points enumerated and posited above in the broader context of *To the Lighthouse* tend to prove that the prodigious prose-style of Mrs. Woolf is the style of a born poet. It brilliantly exhibits a poetic style with poetic rhythms, repetitions and poetic imagery, and through these vehicles she meticulously conveys inner-states, the atmosphere of mind, and this is something difficult to communicate with the resources of ordinary prose spectrum. It is in order to increase the expressiveness of the language that the novelist uses vivid metaphors and symbols which carry a complex aura of associations and emotions. Her metaphors are poetic, and they stay in the mind for long. The images which her metaphors evoke are

often more vivid and startling than the metaphors of normal prose. The basic conflicts of life, like the conflict between life and death, hope and despair, love and hate, social contact and individual freedom, contemplation and action, human misery and the exquisite beauty and joy of life, etc., are all suggested through imagery, symbol and rhythm. Then again like the diction of poetry, her style is highly allusive and profoundly suggestive and graphically and descriptive with nuanced approach. Significant words and resplendent phrases are repeated, and such repetitions are very close to the refrain of a song approving the fact that Woolf is a gifted prose writer. Her style is scholarly, poetic, artistic and richly figurative and symbolic. In brief, what Woolf does is to borrow the technique of poetry to enlarge and amplify the possibilities of expression in prose, at one and the same time to make clear meaning and drive home its emotional implications.

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Bio-note of Corresponding Author:

Dr. Mohammad Shaukat Ansari is working as **Associate Professor** of English at M.L.S.M. College (Under L.N. Mithila University), Darbhanga, Bihar. He worked as **Professor** of English under Ministry of Higher Education, Saudi Arabia. He engaged PG classes at Univ. Department of English for two years as visiting teacher. His areas of interest in teaching are EAP, ESP, ELT, Grammar, Composition, History of English Literature, Poetry and Novel.

Dr. Ansari has published about **forty** articles/papers so far in reputed journals both on language as well as literature aspects. He has also published three ISBN research books entitled **John Keats and His Poetic Development**, **Simplified Introduction to English Literature** and **Improve Your Functional English**. He is in process of writing a book on *Issues, Trends and Challenges in English Language Teaching*. He has completed one UGC approved and funded Minor Research Project in 2018. He is recipient of **eight Honours/Awards** so far that include IARDO The Best Teacher Award of

the Year 2018 and I2OR Outstanding Educator Award – 2018.

Dr. Ansari has presented papers in **twenty** International/National Conferences/Seminars that include NELTA International Conference, Kathmandu, International Conference, BITS Pilani, International Seminar, Banaras Hindu University, 1st TEFL Seminar, Saudi Arabia. He has attended seven Seminars and chaired **seven** technical sessions. He has conducted three workshops and also attended five ones.

Dr. Ansari is an elected Senator and Member of Academic Council at LN Mithila University, Darbhanga, Bihar. He is IQAC Co-ordinator at his college.
