Book Review of Robert Macfarlane's *Is a River Alive*?

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Duaa Salameh
The University of Jordan, Jordan
Ahmad Gholi
Gonbad Kavous University, Iran

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Once a discursive accomplice in the justification of colonialism, travel writing in the twenty-first century has shed its imperial affiliations, addressing urgent subjects such as climate breakdown. Robert Macfarlane's bestselling *Is a River Alive*? is a case in point. Like his *Underland*, the setting of *Is River Alive?* is international, and he departs from the domestic setting of *The Old Ways* and *The Wild Places*. The book charts the travel writer's three journeys to endangered rivers in Ecuador, India, and Canada, in search of an answer to this question: Are rivers alive? To answer this question, Macfarlane does not merely foreground the critical and fragile conditions of the visited rivers; he recognizes the reversibility of wounded, poisoned, and polluted rivers into a healthy existence, provided that indigenous people and river activists mount pressure on the Supreme Court to recognize the independent legal identities of rivers and their sacredness as perceived by the indigenes. Acknowledging their legal status will enable river defenders not only to curb the destructive apathy of neoliberal forces such as mining companies, petrochemical factories, and dam builders, but also to make them accountable for their indiscriminate despoilation. For him, this is not quixotic but a viable prospect.

To advance the critical vision of his narrative, Macfarlane skillfully employs a Marxist outlook, ecocritical sensibility, and postcolonial perspective. The first analytical tool enables the author to expose the demonic side of the neoliberal regime; nonetheless, it stresses the viability of change by the powerless classes/the natives if it is stimulated by intellectuals/environmental activists and lawyers. The second critical approach draws attention to the plight of the environment and demands timely, effective intervention to nip the disaster in the bud. The last identifies the connection between the present degradation of rivers and unethical imperial policies and practices in the past. To complement his critical framework, Macfarlane benefits from the insights of "two eyes": the indigenous animistic vision and the scientific one, enriching his travel narrative and creating a balance between scientific and non-scientific understandings of rivers.

A critical evaluation of the book reveals both significant strengths and notable limitations. One of the book's key strengths lies in the author's ethical stance. He positions himself as an apprentice, elevating his local companions to the role of

wise mentors who instruct him in the literacy of water, forests, animals, and insects. In doing so, he saves himself from the criticism of the 'lone enraptured male' who depopulates his text of travellees (Hannigan 2020: 588). His ethical orientation results in weaving his mentors' voices into the fabric of his text, which, in turn, creates a polyphonic travelogue, decentering the epistemological supremacy of the travel narrator, which once bedeviled the genre of travel writing. At the same time, readers' immediate exposure to travellees' eco-friendly worldviews renders them likable characters with whom the readers can establish rapport. Another strength of the book is its intertextuality. The writer judiciously invokes ideas and anecdotes from eminent writers such as Ursula Le Guin, Coleridge, Krishnamurti, Thomas Berry, Algernon Blackwood, Virgil, Homer, Dante, and the unknown author of the Epic of Gilgamesh, among others. That is why Hannigan calls him 'the footloose scholar in the wilds' (p. 581). These intertexts add literary color and a scholarly layer to his narrative, preventing it from being monotonous and monochromatic. The travelogue's further merit is the identification of colonial legacies in the present state of endangered rivers, and how powerful corporations follow an unethical path of colonialism with the support of corrupt politicians. A further strength lies in its utopian impulse, celebrating the agency of subaltern subjects to challenge and even conquer neoliberal titans. Finally, the book's most notable strength is its emphasis on the healing and transformative energy of rivers. The writer, for instance, demonstrates how passionate faith in the purity and benevolence of rivers can liberate one from his or her inner demons, and how being in their proximity facilitates the process of what Deleuze and Guattari call 'becoming a river.'

Despite its notable merits, the book suffers from stylistic inconsistency. The first two parts are clear and readable, but the third chapter adopts a dense, highly poetic language that disrupts the reading flow and creates stylistic disharmony. A subtler flaw of the book is its orientalist inclination, which risks perpetuating the stereotype of a misogynistic Orient, particularly in its reference to an Indian stepfather who abuses his wife and stepdaughter. Finally, a conspicuous flaw of the travelogue lies in the author's deliberate manipulation of the narrative structure in the third part to achieve a predetermined effect in the conclusion. The events in this section unfold exactly as the writer anticipates and outlines at the chapter's outset. This tightly choreographed plotline undermines the work's credibility, sincerity, and status as nonfiction, even though adopting the novelistic plotline in his travel writing is his writerly trademark (Greenblatt 2024: 1004).

In conclusion, the book's critical force, polyphony, intertextuality, ethical commitment, and timely intervention in an era of river degradation outweigh its shortcomings and affirm its originality. As such, it is essential reading for general readers, ecologically engaged audiences, and scholars of nature writing, ecocriticism, travel writing, postcolonial studies, and eco-Marxism.

Duaa Salameh (Ph.D.) Associate Professor – Corresponding author
English Department/ School of Foreign Languages
The University of Jordan, Jordan
Email: d.salameh@ju.edu.jo
ORCID Number: 0000-0002-3878-6198

Ahmad Gholi (Ph.D.) Assistant Professor
Department of Foreign Languages
Faculty of Humanities and Physical Education
Gonbad Kavous University, Iran.
Email: ahmadgholi@gonbad.ac.ir
ORCID Number: 0000-0002-2283-1134

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