

Botanical Whisperers: Ecofeminism and the Hidden Symbols of Life in Elizabeth Gilbert's *The Signature of All Things*

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Abstract

Literature has long functioned as a medium through which human relations with the natural world are imagined and interpreted. Emerging environmental explorations such as ecofeminism emphasize the interconnectedness of ecological and cultural systems, drawing attention to the resilience of what is often overlooked or dismissed. These approaches not only challenge dominant hierarchies but also highlight the hidden value within the marginal spaces of life.

This paper explores Elizabeth Gilbert's *The Signature of All Things* through the story of Alma Whittaker, a nineteenth century botanist whose devotion to moss symbolizes persistence, resilience, and the power of unnoticed. The novel's guiding idea of "signature of all things" affirms that even the smallest elements of nature carry meaning, aligning with ecofeminist principles that call for recognition of both women's contributions and nonhuman life forms. By engaging with themes of science, gender, and ecological interdependence, the novel provides a fertile ground for examining how quiet perseverance and undervalued knowledge sustain broader systems of progress.

Keywords: Literature and Ecology, Ecofeminism, Moss, Resilience

Literature has long served as a site where ecological ideas are imagined, challenged and reshaped. Worlds within words position literature not only as an artistic expression but also a critical medium for rethinking environmental justice. Such approaches illuminate the resilience of what is often overlooked and call attention to the subtle forms of life that sustain ecological balance. Ecofeminism extends this understanding by examining how environmental and gendered hierarchies intersect with literary narratives. Within this broader frame, American literature offers a particularly rich space for exploring intersections of ecology and narrative. Defined by diversity and transformation, American literature is a dynamic and multifaceted field that encompasses a wide range of voices, perspectives, and genres, reflecting the ever-changing landscape of American society and culture.

Elizabeth Gilbert, born in 1969 in Connecticut, has become one of the most widely read contemporary American authors. She achieved international recognition with her memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006) and her career spans journalism, memoir, and fiction. Across genres, her works consistently explore themes of resilience, creativity and personal transformation. In 2013 she turned to historical fiction *The Signature of All Things*, which was longlisted for Bailey's Women's prize for fiction.

The novel stretches across the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and centres on Alma Whittaker, a botanist born into privilege yet destined to obscurity. Her father, Henry Whittaker, rises from poverty in England to wealth in Philadelphia through botanical trade and plantation ventures, eventually marrying the sharp minded Beatrix. Alma born in 1800, grows up surrounded by intellectual curiosity. Encouraged to pursue education in a time when opportunities for women were limited, she develops a lasting fascination with moss, a subject dismissed by many but destined to define her scientific career.

Alma dedicates her adulthood to bryology producing meticulous studies that revealed both her intellectual brilliance and her marginalization within a male dominated academic culture. Her personal life, is however marked by disappointment. A marriage to the spiritual artist Ambrose Pike proves unfulfilling, when she discovers his affection lies elsewhere, including an intimate relationship with another man, Tomorrow Morning in Tahiti. Though wounded, Alma continues her research and formulates a theory of evolution she calls “competitive alteration”, anticipating Darwinian thought. She ultimately withholds publication, troubled by the unresolved question of altruism, which she cannot reconcile within a purely competitive framework.

Alma’s journey to Tahiti and later Amsterdam expand her understanding on colonialism, indigenous knowledge, and ecological interdependence. Witnessing missionary oppression and suppression of native traditions sharpens her awareness of how power shapes both scientific practice and cultural authority. In her final years she embraces obscurity, finding peace the quiet significance of her lifelong work. Her enduring study of moss becomes a mirror of her own existence: resilient, modest, and vital.

Gilbert’s novel lends itself to analysis through ecofeminism, a theoretical framework linking ecological thought with feminist critique. Ecofeminism underscores how the subjugation of women and exploitation of nature emerge from the same systems of domination. Rather than restricting its focus to women and the natural world, the movement emphasizes interdependence, resilience and intersectionality across cultural, social, and ecological contexts. By exposing the entanglements of race, class, gender and species, ecofeminism challenges patriarchal structures that diminish the lives of both human and non-human beings.

Vandana Shiva stands as one of the most influential voices in ecofeminism. Trained as a physicist, she shifted her career toward environmental activism after witnessing deforestation near her childhood home in Dehra dun. In 1982 she established the research foundation for science, technology and ecology, in writings, such as “*Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*” and “*Ecofeminism*”, she argues that women, particularly in marginalized communities, bear the brunt of environmental degradation and social injustice. Her philosophy resonates with Gilbert’s novel, as both emphasize the interconnectedness of ecological destruction and social inequalities.

The Signature of All Things, Alma Whittaker's exploration of nature and her scientific pursuits could be seen as reflecting the interconnectedness between human society and the natural world, echoing Shiva's emphasis on the interdependence of ecosystems and human communities. Shiva critiques the role of global capitalism in driving environmental destruction and exploitation, arguing that profit-driven motives often prioritize short-term gains over long-term sustainability and social equity. Similarly, in the novel, the character Henry Whittaker's pursuit of wealth through the exploitation of natural resources, such as medicinal plants, mirrors the critique of capitalist exploitation of the environment.

Shiva advocates for the empowerment of women as key agents of environmental stewardship and sustainability. She argues that women, particularly in indigenous and rural communities, have valuable traditional knowledge and practices that can contribute to ecological preservation. In *The Signature of All*

Things, the character Alma Whittaker's passion for botanical study and her dedication to scientific inquiry could be interpreted as a form of empowerment and agency, challenging traditional gender roles and contributing to the understanding and appreciation of nature. Shiva's work often highlights the resilience of communities in the face of environmental challenges and the importance of grassroots activism and resistance against environmental exploitation. Similarly, in the novel, characters like Alma Whittaker demonstrate resilience in their pursuit of knowledge and understanding of the natural world, while also challenging societal norms and expectations. In 1991 she launched Navdanya, a seed saving initiative dedicated to protecting biodiversity and empowering rural communities. Her philosophy emphasizes that survival rests on valuing what is small, diverse, and easily overlooked whether indigenous seeds or women's everyday labour. Alma Whittaker embodies a similar principle Immersing herself in the study of mosses, Alma connects deeply with the vitality and resilience of these small yet incredibly adaptive plants. Moss becomes not only her subject of study but also a metaphor of her own life which is resilient, persistent, and indispensable despite being overlooked.

“A single clump of mosses can lie dormant and dry for forty years a stretch, and then vault back again into life with a mere soaking of water.” (169). The multifaceted roles that mosses play in the natural world, underscoring Alma Whittaker's profound understanding and reverence for these seemingly unassuming plants. Firstly, mosses emerge as pivotal agents in erosion control, as they meticulously break down rocks and boulders over extended periods, thereby contributing to the gradual transformation of geological formations into fertile soil. Secondly, their remarkable adaptability shines through as they thrive in a diverse array of environments, from bustling city sidewalks to frigid Arctic regions, demonstrating resilience and versatility in the face of varying ecological conditions. Moreover, mosses emerge as pioneering species, often assuming the role of primary colonizers in barren or fire-affected landscapes, kickstarting the intricate process of ecological succession and laying the groundwork for the eventual reestablishment of diverse plant communities. Their ability to remain dormant for extended durations, up to forty years, before swiftly revitalizing upon exposure to water, serves as a testament to their resilience and capacity to rebound from adverse environmental circumstances.

Alma's scientific achievements remain underrecognized, reflecting the broader invisibility of women in nineteenth century intellectual circles. Like Shiva's insistence that biodiversity and women's work must be respected despite their marginalization, Alma demonstrates that neglected life forms carry profound ecological and intellectual significance. Alma at the end of the novel reflects that she has had a fortunate life because she recognizes the value of her own intellectual journey and the contributions she has made to the field of science, despite not receiving the same level of recognition as Charles Darwin or Alfred Russel Wallace. She acknowledges that although her theory of competitive alteration was similar to Darwin's, she arrived at it independently and understands that Darwin's success was deserved as he had been developing his theory long before her realization. Alma's contentment with her life stems from her satisfaction in pursuing her passion for scientific inquiry and contributing to the understanding of evolutionary processes, even if her work went unrecognized in the public sphere. The novel suggests that the contributions of women like Alma, who worked tirelessly behind the scenes, are just as valuable as the accomplishments of more famous men. It highlights the importance of recognizing and celebrating the often-overlooked achievements of women in science, whose trailblazing work was overshadowed by their male counterparts. By juxtaposing Alma's story with the broader narrative of forgotten women in science, the novel underscores the idea that both big gestures and small, unnoticed actions are integral to progress and advancement in any field.

Beatrix Alma's mother, shapes the foundation of the vision. Refusing to follow the conventions of nineteenth century motherhood, she insisted on her daughter's intellectual discipline and critical independence. While many mothers of the era prepared their daughters for embroidery, cooking, or marriage, Beatrix cultivated Alma's scientific mind. Her unconventional nurturing allowed Alma to pursue botany in a world dominated by men. By rejecting domestic stereotypes Beatrix reinforced the ecofeminist idea that the overlooked moss, seeds, or women's knowledge carries the power to sustain and transform life.

Alma Whittaker's love life, particularly her relationship with Ambrose Pike, is intricately connected to her passion for nature and offers a deeper understanding of her character, as well as the novel's exploration of love, desire, and the human connection to the natural world. Ambrose Pike and Alma Whittaker share a profound fascination with the natural world, though their perspectives differ significantly. Alma's interest is scientific, rooted in observation and empirical evidence, whereas Ambrose approaches nature with a spiritual and almost mystical reverence, noting that "the old cobbler had believed in something he called signature of all things-namely, that God had hidden clues for humanity's betterment inside the design of every flower, leaf, fruit, and tree on the earth. All the natural world was a divine code, Boehme claimed, containing proof of our creator's love" (229).

Ambrose's way of thinking is deeply influenced by the mystical and philosophical ideas of Jacob Boehme, particularly Boehme's concept of signature of all things. This concept suggest that God has embedded hidden clues for humanity's betterment within the design of every element of the natural world, including plants. This shared interest forms the initial bond between them, highlighting how nature can bring people together despite their differing worldviews. Ambrose's spirituality, which Alma finds both intriguing and perplexing, represents an alternative way of connecting with the natural world, suggesting that nature can be understood and appreciated on multiple levels.

The life of Alma Whittaker and her journey of discovery both personal and scientific weaves a rich tapestry that illustrates the complexity of human endeavour and the natural world. This reflection brings to light the often overlooked but crucial roles played by those who have worked in the shadows, contributing significantly to our collective knowledge and wellbeing without seeking personal glory. It acknowledges the intrinsic value of every individual's contribution, whether or not they are recognized in their time or never. By exploring Alma's life, the novel underscores the idea that fulfilment and a sense of purpose can be found in the relentless pursuit of knowledge and in the simple act of observing and engaging with the world around us.

The *Signature of All Things* offers a powerful reminder of the beauty and complexity of life, the endless curiosity drives human enquiry, and the quiet, unassuming work that often paves the way for groundbreaking discoveries. It champions the idea that a life lived with passion, curiosity, and dedication to understanding the mysteries of the natural world is a life full of purpose and meaning, regardless of whether it unfolds in the spotlight or in the solitude of obscurity. The poignant statement, for every tropical orchid there is a hardworking moss, creeping unseen along a stone, beautifully encapsulates the essence of the narrative and the broader truth about human endeavour and the natural world. It reminds us of the intrinsic value of all contributions irrespective of their visibility or recognition. Just as the moss, in its quiet, unassuming ways, plays a crucial role in the ecosystem, so to do a countless individual in the fabric of human history. Their work, often overlooked or forgotten, is fundamental to the collective achievements of society. This narrative compels us to reconsider what we value and recognize as contributions to knowledge, progress and the betterment of our world. It challenges us to acknowledge and celebrate the

unseen labour that supports and enriches our lives, understanding that the grandeur of a tropical orchid is made possible by the silent, persistent efforts of the moss. The novel *Signature of All Things* is a call to honour and appreciate every aspect of the natural world and human endeavour, recognizing that the most significant contributions often come from quietest corners. For every achievement that captures our attention, there is an unseen force of nature or a quiet labourer, reminding us that in the tapestry of life, every thread, no matter how small or inconspicuous, holds immeasurable value.

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