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## **‘Slowly, death rides this hot glacier’: A Reading of John Kinsella’s Seven Selected Ecopoems**

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### **Abstract:**

John Kinsella, an internationally acclaimed Australian poet, belongs to that small group of avant-garde nature poets who decided to deviate from the dominant mode of traditional nature poetry and usher in the new mode of ecopoetry, to address the ecological issues of present time. A prolific writer Kinsella, published multiple anthologies, all of which demand our special attention. But the ecopoems of his recent volume titled *Peripheral Light: Selected and New Poems* probably reveal Kinsella at his best. This paper endeavours to explain a few basic aspects of ecopoetry and show how seven selected poems from this volume exploit these aspects.

**Keywords: ecotone, ecological destruction, anthropocentrism, human invasion in nature, mode of protest.**

John Kinsella, whom Harold Bloom extolled as, ‘an orphic fountain, a prodigy of the imagination’ ( *Peripheral Light: New and Selected Poems*, Introduction. <http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poems-book/peripheral-light-0243000>), is undoubtedly one of the most talented and celebrated creative writers in the field of contemporary ecoliterature. In spite of being deeply rooted in Australian literary tradition and West Australian landscape, Kinsella succeeded to win international acclaim as a novelist, activist and most importantly as a very gifted ecopoet. His distinguished poetic diction represents, to borrow Harold Bloom’s words, ‘improbable fecundity, eclecticism and a stand that fuses populism and elitism in poetic audience’ (*Peripheral Light: New and Selected Poems*, Introduction. <http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poems-book/peripheral-light-0243000>). Himself an active environmentalist, Kinsella, does not belong to the dominant paradigm of romantic nature poetry where the central focus is always on the vision and perception of some human being. His poetry, on the other hand, centralises environment on the brink of a precipice. Once in an interview, Kinsella himself declared that, ‘My aim is to bring awareness of the ways damage is being done to ecologies on macro and micro levels’ (Kinsella & Blackie, 11-12). His much eulogised anthology, *Peripheral Light: New and Selected Poems*, published in 2003, precisely serves this purpose. Essentially postmodern yet lyrical, erudite yet emotional, the poems of this volume, unveil an exquisite tapestry that very carefully records the havoc that the human civilisation wrecked on environment and its ecological balance. Sometimes indignant and sometimes wrathful, sometimes frustrated and sometimes nostalgic in tone, these poems not only deal with the abuse of ecology, but also with the changing relationship, the increasing distance between nature and modern human culture. In the poems of this volume, Kinsella, in stead of representing nature merely as a backdrop for the evolution of greater human consciousness, brings nature at the centre. Therefore, his beautiful, often cryptic poems succeed to provide, ‘nature...its own voice, separate and at least equal to the voice of humans’ (Scigaj, 5). The object of this paper is to take into account seven selected poems- ‘Finches’, ‘The Ascension of

the Sheep', 'The Silo', 'Sculpting a Poem From the Landscape's Painting', 'Why They Stripped the Last Trees From the Banks of the Creek', 'Parrot Deaths: Rites of Passage', 'Mulga Parrots', and to explore some of the distinguishing theoretical and conceptual features that elevate them from mere poems on nature to ecopoems.

Before we begin to concentrate on these particular ecopoems, we must briefly discuss about ecopoetics and its particular aspects that will prove to be necessary in the present context. Etymologically the word 'ecopoetics' is a combination of two Greek words- *Oikos*, from which 'eco' is derived, implies 'house', 'a dwelling place', *Poesis* means 'making' or 'creation'. So, in simple terms, ecopoetry attempts to make home or a dwelling place through poetry. Jonathan Skinner, the editor of the groundbreaking journal *Ecopoetics* and a central figure in this field, elaborates in a similar vein:

Eco here signals- no more, no less- the house we share with several million other species, our planet Earth. "Poetics" is used as *poesis* or making, not necessarily to emphasize the critical over the creative art (nor vice versa). Thus: ecopoetics, a house making (Skinner, 7).

So ecopoems are poems that focus on, 'the ecological relations between human and nonhuman organisms and their surroundings' (Barron, 455). However the central core, without which an ecopoem cannot survive, is 'ecotone'. Biologically an ecotone implies the particular space or the border between multiple ecosystems, which can be marked as a tension zone. According to Christopher Arigo, '...an ecotone exists between the edges of ecosystems- it is on the edge...literally an ecotone is a place where ecologies are in tension.' (Arigo, 2-3). Ecopoetics too in a similar manner is always on a creative edge that continually challenges and deconstructs cultural, natural, linguistic, scientific and theoretical boundaries. So by definition, ecopoetry is interdisciplinary. In this context Christopher Arigo commented that, 'A good ecopoem then is a house made founded on the tension between the cutting edge of innovative and ecological thinking.' (Arigo, 3. emphasis original). Ecopoetry therefore is 'a site of resistance' (Arigo, 3), that at the same time addresses the problems of crumbling ecosystems around us and contributes to make our planet habitable for all forms of life. Closely connected with this idea of ecotone and the inherent tension in ecopoetry is the concept of human invasion in nature. Unfortunately in our modern world no ecosystem could manage to remain unaffected by human invasion. Technology and industry which include the agricultural industry as well, affected every landscape and their unique indigenous ecosystem drastically. Christopher Arigo quite innovatively describes such human invasion and the subsequent destruction of natural landscapes as the 'Revised Sublime' (Arigo, 7). Here sublime does not imply the awe-inspiring beauty of nature, rather,

... the tension between the tranquillity and beauty as juxtaposed with human intervention in the landscape, often in its most destructive forms... (Arigo, 7).

If we try to fathom deeper we can easily figure out that a landscape and its ecosystems and even the cultures that are a part of the ecosphere can be invaded by a number of things like politics, economy, industry etc.- all of which form an undercurrent that gives ecopoetics its edge, its tension. Ecopoetry attempts to recover this loss by restoring our lost connection with nature. Therefore we can safely say that ecopoetry connects.

The Most important thing about ecopoetry is that it does not always centre on nature or its ecosystems. Contemporary ecopoetry is absolutely aware of its constructed nature and its important position in what we might compare with the holistic, organic ecosystem i.e. literature. Another defining characteristic of ecopoetry is that it attempts to negate the hierarchy that exists between human beings and other forms of life in nature. It hopes to change the anthropocentric point of view i.e. as Timothy Clarke writes: ‘...the almost all- pervading assumption that it is only in relation to humans that anything else has value.’(as qtd in ‘ “Images adequate to our predicament”: Ecology, Environment and Ecopoetics’, 38). So, ecopoetics always promotes ‘non-anthropocentric nature poetry’ (Lidstrom & Garrard, 40). These fundamental concepts, amalgamated with typical Kinsella robustness, dark comic sense and a deep attachment with the Australian landscape, form the very essence of the poems mentioned earlier in this paper.

Once, in an interview with Cambridge academic Rod Mengham, Kinsella said, ‘A writer doesn’t exist in a vacuum’. He further asserted that, ‘We are talking about an invaded space, from a farming perspective, a land that has been ecologically devastated...’(as qtd in ‘Radical Pastoralism: John Kinsella’s Great “Pastoral Trilogy”, 2). Noticeably, in this context, he consciously uses the word ‘space’ in stead of ‘place’, as ‘place’ implies a particular location while ‘space’ is an inclusive abstract idea or concept. Almost all the ecological poems of Kinsella dwell on this ‘invaded space’ and the outcome of such invasion. Therefore, though Kinsella’s poems that we are going to discuss harp on the distinctive landscape and ecosystems of Australia or to be specific, on the wheatbelt of West Australia, the implications, the message they convey are never local. It is always universal. So, when Kinsella writes about the ecological destruction of the local landscape, the rising level of salinity in land and water, the devastating effect of excessive salt on birds like Mulga Parrot or Finch, and the clearing of trees and bushes, he is addressing the environmental problems that plague Australia as well as any other country on earth. By raising such controversial issues, these poems occupy that particular space where human and non-human ecosystems are in tension. Tension caused by the indiscreet intervention of humans in the natural ecosystems forms the thematic core of these poems. In ‘Parrot Deaths: Rites of Passage’ the poet depicts the result of human callousness through the macabre image of, ‘The orange, golden, and emerald hearts of parrots litter the roads.’(‘Parrot Deaths: Rites of Passage’. <http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/parrot-deaths-rites-of-passage-0243028>). In the country side of west Australia, every year, fast moving vehicles cause the death of numerous birds as they try to collect food grains spilled on the road. In ‘Mulga Parrots’ too we find ‘subtle birds’ desperately searching ‘salt wastes’ for food as their natural habitats have transformed into mere ‘thin scrubland’ (‘MulgaParrots’.<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/mulga-parrots-0243094>).

If the above mentioned poems draw our attention towards the outcomes of our callousness and indifference towards other non-human lives, ‘The Ascension of Sheep’ in a tone of caustic irony reminds us how brutally we slaughter animals to keep the meat and wool industries running. And when we hope to learn the cause behind such heedless ecological destruction, in spite of its promising title, the poem ‘Why They Stripped the Last Trees from the Banks of the Creek’ gives a ridiculously

hollow explanation and exposes the pointlessness of it all. The poem shows that an entire ecosystem existing on the banks of creek has been destroyed only because:

The old man  
 couldn't stand the thought  
 of bare paddocks with a creek  
 covered by trees slap bang  
 in the middle of them. ('Why They Stripped the Last Trees from the Banks of the Creek'. <http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/why-they-stripped-the-last-trees-from-the-banks-of-the-creek-0243025>)

While all these poems focus on specific ecosystems, 'Sculpting a Poem from the Landscape's Painting' gives an inclusive, almost apocalyptic image of eco-destruction:

Neglected fruit trees weighed down  
 not with fruit but lichen stoop over beds of offcut wool  
 ...  
 Burnt flower heads shed by dryandra  
 bushes neatly cradle the mummified corpses of gnats and bees,  
 ('Sculpting a Poem from the Landscape's Painting'.  
<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/sculpting-a-poem-from-the-landscape-s-painting-0243021>)

Non-human ecosystems that are inseparable parts of the West Australian ecosystem but not particularly useful to humans, are exterminated without sparing a single moment to think about the ecological imbalance such actions would create:

Years  
 back the usurping farmers cut the throats of wandoo  
 and blackbutt, redgum and shaggy-headed dryandrs bushes.  
 ...  
 The water flows rapidly now, carrying a frothing head of salt ...  
 ('Sculpting a Poem from the Landscape's Painting'.)  
<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/sculpting-a-poem-from-the-landscape-s-painting-0243021>)

Or,

Anyway, he was old  
 and we humoured him-  
 chains, rabbit rippers,  
 chainsaws. We cleared  
 those banks until the water  
 ran a stale sort of red. ('Why They Stripped the Last Trees from the Banks of the Creek'.  
<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/why-they-stripped-the-last-trees-from-the-banks-of-the-creek-0243025>)

The political dimension of such invasion into the natural landscape is hard to ignore. Hence if, 'a good poem is a poem under tension: a tension located at the intersection

of human interference and destruction' (Arigo, 9). These poems definitely deserve the title.

A detailed reading of these poems will further reveal that though on the surface level they talk about the tensioned zone in which they are situated, by doing so, they create a platform to protest against such callous apathy for other natural lives. This angry, sarcastic voice of protestation can be heard in 'The Ascension of Sheep':

and now the sheep  
in sodden clothes may

fleece the farmer-  
who warm by the fire  
tallies heads and prices  
and thinks about slaughter- ('The Ascension of Sheep').

<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/the-ascension-of-sheep-0243020>).

And again in 'The Silo' where, 'the old silo with its rammed earth walls /and high thatched roof, incongruous amongst / the new machinery and silver field bins' ('The silo'. <http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/the-silo-0243024>) suddenly bursts with:

...dark  
fire erupting from the heart of the white  
silo, trembling with energy deeper  
than any anchorage earth could offer. ('The Silo').

<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/the-silo-0243024>)

These are not poems merely depicting the cruelty towards animals or the rejection of an eco-friendly tradition in the name of upgrading farming industry but also an effort to wake us up. In West Australian wheatbelt where economy is largely depended on farming and animal husbandry, animals like sheep and birds like parrots are often seen either as means of profit or as obstacles to it. Kinsella's eco-poems instigate us to change exactly this practice of judging the worth of everything in terms of human profit or loss. Rightly commented Timothy Clark that, 'the essential problem is *anthropocentrism*, the almost all pervading assumption that it is only in relation to humans that anything has value.' (as qtd in ' "Images adequate to our predicament": Ecology, environment and Eco-poetics' 38). It is because of this practice of placing the paltry even irrational whims of humans, as we find in 'Why They Stripped the Last Trees from the Banks of the Creeks ', over the lives and habitats of non-humans, almost all the ecosystems of this planet now bear the scourge of human intervention. Because the farmers won't allow the parrots anywhere near the fields they try to collect food from highway and die helplessly. As a result of the reckless deforestation, so that the farmers can have maximum arable land, 'It is summer now and the water in the dams is diminishing/ ...The forest is dry and volatile. The dock with its rust has /dried and vanished. The paddocks are dust.' ('Sculpting a Poem from the Landscape's Painting'. <http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/sculpting-a-poem-from-the-landscape-s-painting-0243021>). The devastating effect of salt, that in Kinsella's own admission, 'the most prominent image in my work' ( as qtd in 'Radical

Pastoralism: John Kinsella's Great "Pastoral Trilogy", 3 ) finds expression in the following lines:

The dead finch lies on salt,  
Tight-winged and stretched.

...

the salt's white mystery  
coveting tin cans, skull of sheep.

Slowly, death rides this hot glacier  
further and further away.

(‘Finches’ .<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/finches-0243002>).

Ecopoems, a literary by-product of such environmental destruction, try to open our eyes to the stark reality.

Intervention of technology coupled with human greed and disrespect also announced the end of the age old pastoral practices like the use of silo. Earlier considered to be a symbol of successful harvesting in European culture, the silo is a tall cylindrical structure, used for preserving the harvest. But now ‘the old silo with its rammed earth walls /and high thatched roof, incongruous amongst / the new machinery and silver fieldbins’

(‘TheSilo’ .<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/the-silo-0243024>)

waits for its death helplessly. Even in times,  
when a bumper harvest filled  
every bin and the farmer was hungry  
for space- no one ever mentioned bringing  
the old silo back into service.

(‘The Silo’. <http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/the-silo-0243024>)

The fissure between old natural ways of living and modern practices is now beyond mend. Ecopoetry aspires to re-establish this lost connection with nature and its non-human inhabitants. By acknowledging the intrinsic value and the rights of all forms of life in nature, Kinsella's ecopoems promote the idea of a holistic biosphere where humans are only a tiny part of the complete whole.

The most fascinating part of these poems is that even though they dwell extensively on ecological devastation caused by human beings, directly or indirectly, it does not exclude the humans from the picture completely. Wendell Berry, in his ‘Preserving Wildness’ noted that, ‘Our problem, exactly, is that the human and the natural are indivisible, and yet are different.’(as qtd in ‘Writing Within: Notes on Ecopoetics as Spatial Practice’ ). Poems that we are discussing in this paper highlight this dichotomy in a remarkable manner. They very often subtly emphasize that, such thoughtless deforestation; merciless killings are actually pushing the human lives and its civilisation towards the brink of destruction inch by inch everyday. The more we kill, the more we destroy the ecological balance, the more we are trapped in, ‘a prison from which neither/ could hope for parole, petition, release’ (The Silo.

<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/the-silo-0243024>). Like all the other natural lives, our body and soul too get sustenance from nature. So, cruel slaughtering of birds and beasts only kills the humanity inside us and leads us to a place, 'where the soul/ could never feel secure' (The Ascension of Sheep. <http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/the-ascension-of-sheep-0243020>).

Thus the seven ecopoems discussed in this paper, reveal the multiple dimensions of the interdependent relationship between human beings and nature in a very different but very effective way. They quite successfully manage to deviate from the mainstream nature poetry and establish a new paradigm of environmental poetry that adequately fulfils the demands of time. Leonard M. Scigaj, in his pioneering work, *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets* demanded that, 'we need a poetry that treats nature as a separate and equal other and includes respect for nature conceived as a series of ecosystems' (Scigaj, 5). By bringing nature and its multiple non-human ecosystems at the centre, Kinsella's poems suffice that 'need'. In the present environmental crisis, the ecopoems use the power and appeal of poetry to remind us that, 'Slowly, death rides the hot glacier / further and further away' ('Finches'. <http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/kinsella-john/finches0243002>) and also to promote what Marcella Durand calls, 'a more transparent, less anthropocentric mode of existence' (Durand, 59). In these ways Kinsella's ecopoems contribute to broaden the field of nature writing on the one hand and open up horizons of diverse possibilities on the other.

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