

Emotional Memories Entwined with Ecospace: An Ecocritical and Memory Studies Analysis of Jack London's *The Law of Life*

Lijyamol Thankachan

Assistant professor, Department of English

St. Stephen's College, Uzhavvor

Abstract

Jack London's *The Law of Life* (1901) is a profound emotional narrative depicting the last moments of Koskoosh, an elderly member of a nomadic Alaskan tribe. This paper examines how Koskoosh's episodic memories intertwine with cultural and the eco-scape he lived, revealing an intricate relationship between individual consciousness and ecological spaces. Drawing on contemporary memory studies, including theories of narrative or fictional episodic and collective memory (Conway, 2005; Assmann, 2011), and ecocritical studies (Glotfelty, 1996; Buell, 1995), this analysis highlights how narrative memory functions as a repository and medium for ecological and cultural understanding. The study evaluates memory in *The Law of Life* is inseparable from the environment of its characters in, perceiving nature not as a mere backdrop but as a dynamic agent contributes to the formation of the cultural identity consciousness of each individual.

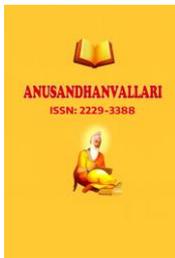
Keywords: Episodic Memory; Eco-scape, ecological memory, cultural memory, nomadic tribes, ecocriticism.

1. Introduction

Memory studies investigates how individuals and communities retain and transmit experiences across time (Halbwachs, 1992). Halbwachs' concept of collective memory emphasizes social mediation, where memory is preserved through ritual, narrative, and communal practice. Connerton (1989) extends this framework to embodied memory, highlighting those ecological interactions—gestures, movements, and sensory experiences—sustain recollection. Assmann (2011) further develops cultural memory as a mechanism for preserving identity, ethical norms, and intergenerational knowledge.

Jack London's *The Law of Life* demonstrates that Koskoosh's memories are autobiographical, narrative, social and collective, episodic and emotional but those memories are consistently moulded by ecological connections. Environmental elements—such as fire, snow, wolves, famine, and seasonal cycles—serve as triggers for both episodic and collective recollections, embedding human consciousness within the eco-scape rather than treating nature as a passive backdrop (London, 1901; Garrard, 2012). For instance, the howl of wolves immediately revives the memory of the old bull moose being hunted, illustrating how predator-prey interactions shape understanding of survival, mortality, and interdependence. Similarly, snow and ice recall past migrations, scarcity, and communal adaptation, highlighting the inseparability of human experience from environmental rhythms (Buell, 1995; Conway, 2005).

Through these eco-mediated recollections, London emphasizes that memory functions as a form of ecological pedagogy: lessons on survival, ethical conduct, and cultural continuity are transmitted through lived interactions with nature. Koskoosh's awareness that "Nature was not kindly to the flesh. She had no concern for that concrete thing called the individual. Her interest lay in the species, the race" (London, 1901, para. 50) exemplifies how ecological observation informs moral and existential understanding. All of Koskoosh's memories—personal,



tribal, and ethical—are formed and framed by environment he lived, demonstrating the fundamental role of the environment in shaping cognition, memory, and cultural knowledge (Assmann, 2011).

Literature review

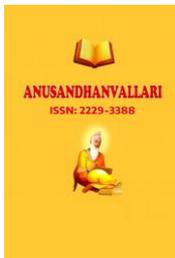
Jack London's *The Law of Life* (1901) is a narrative develops through memories of Koskoosh, an elderly Inuit man left behind by his migrating tribe. The story presents memory not merely as a psychological or autobiographical force but as a mechanism continuously shaped, triggered, and sustained by the natural environment. Koskoosh recollects his personal experiences, collective tribal knowledge, and cultural practices through interactions with the Arctic ecoscape, including fire, snow, wolves, famine, and seasonal cycles, all of which serve as mnemonic triggers. This narrative illustrates that human cognition and ethical understanding are inseparable from ecological context (London, 1901/2015).

Koskoosh's recollections are in the form of episodic memory, which allows him to relive personal experiences with emotional vividness. When he observes his daughter Sit-cum-to-ha tending the sled dogs or recalls hunting moose with Zing-ha, experiencing the cracking of frozen hides, the whines of the dogs, and the crunch of snow underfoot (London, 1901/2015, paras. 5–10). Conway (2005) emphasizes that episodic memory involves re-experiencing past events in their original sensory and emotional contexts, a process exemplified in London's story. Koskoosh preserves the collective memory of his tribe, comprising survival strategies, seasonal migrations, and ethical rules, in line with Halbwachs' (1992) assertion that memory is socially mediated and sustained through ritual, narrative, and communal practice. Koskoosh's cultural memory, as theorized by Assmann (2011), including hunting practices, survival methods, and tribal knowledge. Koskoosh's interactions with the environment such as tending the fire, observing predator wolves, and enduring extreme cold, indicates Connerton's (1989) concept of embodied memory, revealing how memory is enacted through and embedded in lived experience.

Koskoosh's recollection of wolves hunting an old bull moose exemplifies predator–prey dynamics and the food chain, showing that survival depends on adaptation to natural laws rather than ideology. The moose, described as “an old one who cannot keep up with the herd,” is systematically isolated and exhausted by the wolves, exemplifies he himself (London, 1901/2015, para. 35). Koskoosh recognizes that his own aging and imminent death reflects the moose's fate, emphasizing the temporal and interdependent position of humans within the ecosystem (Buell, 1995). The story of the missionary, who failed to survive the Arctic environment despite introducing foreign beliefs and medicine, demonstrates that survival is possible only for those who are attuned to nature. After the missionary dies, the dogs “nosed the stones away and fought over his bones,” denotes the indifference of nature to human constructs (London, 1901/2015, para.40).

The wolves hunting for the old bull moose also illustrates the working of the natural food chain and the predator–prey relationship. The moose, described as “an old one who cannot keep up with the herd,” is already weakened by age is systematically isolated and eventually killed by the wolves. Koskoosh reflects on this process as “their way,” indicating recognition and acceptance of predation as a necessary, natural mechanism rather than an act of cruelty (London, 1901, para. 35). This memory conveys the lesson that humans, like other species, occupy a temporary and interdependent position within the food web. The food chain is depicted as an inevitable and instructive part of nature, emphasizing that human existence is inseparable from broader ecosystem dynamics (London, 1901).

A particularly illustrative episode involves Koskoosh recalling the wolves hunting an old bull moose. The moose, described as “an old one who cannot keep up with the herd,” is systematically isolated, exhausted, and killed by the wolves, demonstrating the functioning of the food chain and predator–prey dynamics (London, 1901/2015, para. 35). Koskoosh perceives that the wolves' actions are “their way,” recognizing predation as a necessary and



inevitable ecological process rather than an act of cruelty. This memory not only conveys a lesson about interdependence within ecosystems but also foreshadows Koskoosh's own fate, highlighting the temporal and contingent position of humans in the natural world. As Buell (1995) and Garrard (2012) argue, environmentally responsive literature encodes ethical and ecological understanding, and in this episode, memory functions as a medium through which Koskoosh internalizes the law of life: survival depends on adaptation to ecological realities rather than human will.

The crackling of fire evokes communal warmth and sustenance, snow and seasonal cycles recall migration patterns and scarcity, famine and abundance denotes lessons of survival and resource management, and family interactions and tribal practices reinforce cultural continuity and ethical norms (London, 1901/2015). These episodic and social recollections are inseparable from ecological memory, confirming Garrard's (2012) argument that literary ecosystems can function as cognitive agents that actively shape perception and thought. Tulving's (1983) model of environmentally cued episodic memory is exemplified when Koskoosh stretches "forth a palsied hand which wandered tremblingly over the small heap of dry wood beside him," with the sensory experience of fire and cold activating layered recollections (London, 1901/2015, para. 3).

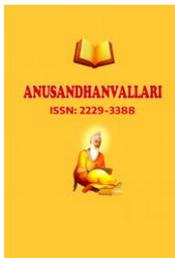
Through these interwoven memories, London portrays human consciousness as fundamentally embedded in ecological processes. Koskoosh reflects that "It was the same everywhere, with all things," acknowledging the universality of ecological law in shaping life, death, and social order (London, 1901/2015, para. 40). The story demonstrates that episodic, collective, and cultural memories are i

The death of Koskoosh's companion Zing-ha, who "*fell through an air-hole on the Yukon*" and froze to death, highlights the overwhelming power of the environment over human life (London, 1901). Nature is portrayed as indifferent and uncontrollable; terrain, climate, and season decide survival, not human strength or intention. The frozen river becomes an agent of death, reinforcing the idea that humans cannot dominate nature. This memory emphasizes ecological vulnerability, where even skilled hunters are powerless against environmental forces. London thus presents nature as the primary determinant of life and death, reducing humans to fragile organisms within a hostile ecosystem (London, 1901).

Koskoosh recalls abandoning his own father during a winter migration, an act dictated by survival logic rather than emotional cruelty. In extreme conditions, the weak threaten the survival of the group. Koskoosh later generalizes this principle, observing that "*Nature was not kindly to the flesh. She had no concern for that concrete thing called the individual. Her interest lay in the species, the race*" (London, 1901). This reflects the ecological principle of natural selection, where only those capable of contributing to survival are sustained. The tribe's practice mirrors how ecosystems naturally regulate populations by eliminating the unfit, ensuring continuity rather than individual preservation.

Koskoosh's memories of famine and abundance illustrate the cyclical nature of resources. He recalls times when "*the salmon run had failed*" and "*the caribou did not come*," resulting in mass starvation where "*not one in ten of the tribe lived*" (London, 1901). In contrast, he also remembers periods of excess when meat spoiled unused. These fluctuations demonstrate ecological limits and carrying capacity, showing that survival depends on adaptation to seasonal cycles. London emphasizes that overdependence on nature's abundance is dangerous, as scarcity inevitably follows plenty (London, 1901).

At the end of the story, Koskoosh becomes prey to the wolves, completing the energy cycle. Once a hunter, he now awaits consumption, recognizing that "*What did it matter after all? Was it not the law of life?*" (London, 1901). His death feeds other organisms, allowing energy to continue flowing through the ecosystem. This transition from consumer to consumed illustrates ecological recycling, where death sustains life. London thus presents death not as an end but as a necessary function within nature's system (London, 1901).



The Arctic winter governs every action in the story. Koskoosh understands that “*the cold has broken*” and that snow is already falling, signals that mark the inevitability of death (London, 1901). Climate dictates migration, abandonment, and survival priorities. Winter symbolizes the final stage of life, paralleling Koskoosh’s physical decline. Nature is not cruel but indifferent, operating according to seasonal rhythm rather than moral judgment (London, 1901).

The tribe’s customs reflect deep ecological awareness. Leaving the elderly behind with firewood is an accepted practice, grounded in survival necessity. Koskoosh accepts this calmly, stating, “*It was the way of life, and it was just*” (London, 1901). Indigenous life is shown as governed by natural law rather than written codes, emphasizing community survival over individual longevity. Tradition functions as an extension of ecological logic (London, 1901).

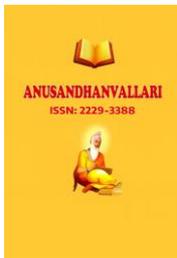
London explicitly defines nature’s governing principle: “*To life she set one task, gave one law. To perpetuate was the task of life, its law was death*” (London, 1901). Individuals are described as “*episodes*” who “*passed away like clouds from a summer sky,*” while the species endures (London, 1901). The story thus presents life as governed by ecological laws rather than morality. Survival, reproduction, and death operate through balance and continuity, with humans occupying no privileged position above other species. Episodes involving fire, snow, wolves, famine, and family interactions illustrate how environmental cues serve as mnemonic triggers. The crackling of fire evokes communal warmth and sustenance, snow and seasonal cycles recall migration patterns and scarcity, wolves and hunting reveal predator–prey relations, famine and abundance encode lessons of survival and resource management, and family interactions and tribal practices reinforce cultural continuity and ethical norms (Garrard, 2012). These ecological stimuli continuously shape Koskoosh’s recollections, confirming Garrard’s (2012) argument that literary ecosystems can act as cognitive agents, actively structuring perception and thought.

Koskoosh reflects that “*It was the same everywhere, with all things,*” acknowledging the universality of ecological law in shaping life, death, and social order (London, 1901/2015, para. 40). The Arctic environment actively informs consciousness, demonstrating that ethical understanding and cultural practices are inseparable from ecological embeddedness. Schacter (1996) contends that memory is reconstructive and shaped by social and environmental contexts rather than isolated cognition, a principle vividly illustrated in London’s narrative. Koskoosh’s final submission to death is informed not by despair but by ecological comprehension; he accepts that “*To life she set one task, gave one law. To perpetuate was the task of life, its law was death*” (London, 1901/2015, para. 50). Memory thus functions as a medium through which humans learn to live within nature rather than above it, sustaining cultural continuity while encoding ecological wisdom for future generations, a clear deep ecological awareness. *The Law of Life* exemplifies ecological memory, showing that episodic, collective, and cultural memory are intertwined and continuously mediated by the natural environment. Koskoosh’s experiences underscore that human consciousness, ethical awareness, and survival strategies are grounded in ecological reality.

This study demonstrates that *The Law of Life* offers a literary representation of ecological memory. Koskoosh’s memories are inseparable from the Arctic ecoscape; they record lessons of survival, adaptation, and continuity taught by nature itself. By integrating episodic, cultural, and ecological memory, London portrays human consciousness as fundamentally embedded in environmental experience.

Findings

This study finds that Jack London’s *The Law of Life* constructs memory not merely as a psychological or autobiographical faculty but as an ecological and ethical pedagogy shaped through sustained interaction with the natural environment. Koskoosh’s recollections function as narrative memory through which ecological knowledge, survival ethics, and cultural continuity are transmitted. His memory is consistently triggered by



environmental stimuli—snow, cold, wolves, fire, and famine—demonstrating that cognition in the story is inseparable from the ecoscape. In this sense, London anticipates contemporary ecological memory theory, which emphasizes that memory is embedded in and activated by environmental contexts rather than confined to individual consciousness (Assmann, 2011; Conway, 2005).

Koskoosh's recollections teach him how life operates according to natural law. Memories of hunting, famine, and aging animals are instructive rather than sentimental, reinforcing that nature privileges continuity over individuals.

The analysis reveals that memory in the story operates at the intersection of episodic and cultural memory. Koskoosh recalls personal events—such as abandoning his father or witnessing a wolf-moose hunt—that simultaneously encode collective tribal knowledge about survival, migration, and population control. This convergence illustrates Assmann's (2011) concept that cultural memory preserves knowledge necessary for group continuity beyond individual lifespans. London emphasizes this continuity when Koskoosh reflects that individuals are merely "episodes" who "passed away like clouds from a summer sky," while the tribe endures through obedience to natural law (London, 1901).

The Law of Life exemplifies ecological memory—memory shaped, stored, and activated through long-term interaction with ecosystems. The howl of wolves instantly revives recollections of the old bull moose being pulled down, embodies how ecological stimuli function as mnemonic triggers. Such stimulus-driven memory aligns with ecological memory research, which emphasizes the co-constitutive role of environment in memory formation (Garrard, 2012). Nature functions as an active agent shaping cognition and ethics. Koskoosh observes: "He had been born close to the earth, and close to the earth had he lived, and the law thereof was not new to him" (London, 1901). His understanding of life and death derives from observation of ecological cycles—birth, growth, decline, and extinction—rather than religion or abstract moral codes, supporting Garrard's (2012) argument that ecocritical texts foreground human–nonhuman relationality.

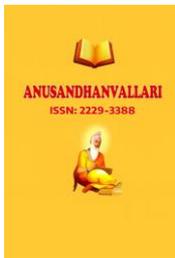
The missionary episode reinforces this ecological argument. The missionary introduces foreign belief systems and medicine but contributes nothing to survival, ultimately dying in the unforgiving tundra: "the dogs afterwards nosed the stones away and fought over his bones" (London, 1901). This demonstrates that ecological law is universal, independent of culture or ideology, and memory preserves this lesson for Koskoosh.

The study also finds that storytelling and memory function as mechanisms of cultural continuity. Koskoosh's recollections of famine—"the salmon run had failed... the caribou did not come" (London, 1901)—encode ecological knowledge crucial for future survival. Such memories operate as oral environmental archives, reflecting Indigenous knowledge systems that transmit long-term environmental understanding through narrative (Buell, 1995; Heise, 2008).

Thus, *The Law of Life* integrates ecological and cultural memory into a unified narrative structure. Memory is relational, connecting individual experience to ecological systems; performative, guiding survival behaviour; and pedagogical, and ethical acceptance of nature's indifference. Koskoosh's final submission to death exemplifies ecological comprehension: "To life she set one task, gave one law. To perpetuate was the task of life, its law was death" (London, 1901). London presents memory as the medium through which humans learn to live—and die—within nature rather than above it.

2. Limitations and Research Gaps

Despite growing interest in memory studies and ecocriticism, several gaps remain. Ecological memory in literature is still underexplored, with most research focusing primarily on human-centered recollection. Few studies examine the convergence of individual, cultural, and ecological memory, particularly how environmental cues



shape episodic recollection in survival narratives. Additionally, Indigenous knowledge systems and storytelling as carriers of ecological memory receive limited scholarly attention. Finally, the ethical and pedagogical functions of memory in transmitting environmental wisdom are rarely addressed, leaving room for further interdisciplinary inquiry that bridges memory, literature, and ecological consciousness.

3. Conclusion

Jack London's *The Law of Life* exemplifies ecological memory as primary, with cultural memory emerging through environmental interaction. Koskoosh's memories—triggered by fire, snow, wolves, famine, and tribal practices—demonstrate that memory, culture, and survival are embedded in ecology. Environmental stimuli structure episodic recollections, preserve collective memory, and sustain cultural knowledge across generations.

The analysis shows that nature is not backdrop but active participant in human cognition, memory, and cultural continuity. By foregrounding ecological memory, the story offers a framework for understanding how Indigenous and nomadic societies encode survival knowledge, family relations, and ethical engagement with the environment.

This study contributes to memory studies, ecocriticism, and Indigenous epistemology, showing that literary depictions of ecological memory provide insight into human-environment interdependence, demonstrating that consciousness and cultural continuity are inseparable from ecological experience.

Koskoosh's recollections of his life and tribe emerge through ecological interactions, with the natural environment acting as an active agent in shaping memory rather than a passive backdrop. By foregrounding ecological memory, the story, *The Law of Life* reveals how human cognition, survival, and culture are inseparable from environmental experience.

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