

**Bound by Tradition, Driven by Choice: A Study of Neela in Chitra Banerjee
Divakaruni's Victory Song**

Mrs. R. Sakthi Saranya M.A., M.Phil.,B.Ed.,
Assistant Professor, Department of English
J.P.College of Arts and Science, Tenkasi,
Affiliated to MS University, Tirunelveli
Mail Id: saranyarathinavel92@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the themes of marriage, freedom, and cultural boundaries in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *Neela: Victory Song*, focusing on how these elements shape the protagonist's personal journey. Set against the backdrop of India's independence movement in the 1940s, the novel follows Neela as she navigates the societal expectations placed upon her, particularly regarding arranged marriage and traditional gender roles. As Neela gains awareness of women's rights and personal autonomy, she begins to challenge the constraints imposed by her family and society. Her defiance against patriarchal norms parallels India's struggle for freedom, making her story a symbolic reflection of the country's fight for independence. This paper examines Neela's pursuit of self-determination, illustrating how education and exposure to new ideas play a crucial role in shaping progressive thought. The novel's themes remain relevant today, as gender equality, personal choice, and cultural expectations continue to shape lives across the world. Through Neela's journey, *Victory Song* stands as a compelling narrative of empowerment, resistance, and the enduring fight for both personal and national liberation.

Keywords: Arranged Marriage, Gender Roles, Cultural Expectations, Freedom and Autonomy, Women's Rights, Indian Independence Movement, Patriarchy and Resistance, Coming-of-Age, Self-Determination, Empowerment

In *Victory Song*, marriage is depicted as a deeply ingrained cultural expectation in 1940s India. During this time, arranged marriages were not just common but expected, with parents playing a central role in selecting suitable partners for their daughters. Women had little say in the matter, as marriage was viewed as a family obligation rather than a personal choice. Neela's engagement at a young age reflects these societal norms, emphasizing how girls were often denied autonomy over their own futures. However, Neela's aspirations differ from the traditional path laid out for her—she longs for education, independence, and a life beyond the roles of wife and mother. This internal conflict highlights the tension between personal dreams and societal traditions, making her struggle a powerful reflection of the larger fight for freedom taking place in India at the time.

Marriage, as presented in the novel, serves as both a limitation and a cultural anchor. While it is an institution that provides stability and continuity within families and communities, it also becomes a tool of oppression when imposed without personal consent. The expectation that Neela will marry without questioning her role as a daughter and future wife underscores how deeply entrenched these norms were in Indian society at the time. Her journey, however, demonstrates that even within a rigid system, resistance and transformation are possible.

As the novel progresses, Neela's exposure to the Indian independence movement broadens her perspective. She begins to recognize the parallels between the country's fight for liberation from British rule and her own desire for self-determination. Just as India refuses to be subjugated by colonial rule, Neela questions the societal customs that dictate her future. Inspired by the revolutionary spirit around her, she refuses to passively accept her fate, instead seeking an identity beyond the limitations imposed on her. Her defiance is more than just a personal rebellion—it symbolizes a greater movement toward change and the pursuit of justice.

Neela's struggle also sheds light on the rigid gender roles that defined women's lives in mid-20th-century India. At the time, women were expected to be obedient daughters, dutiful wives, and nurturing mothers, with limited access to education and personal freedom. Neela, however, refuses to conform entirely to these expectations. While her family views marriage as an essential milestone, she envisions a future where she can make her own choices. Her resistance challenges the notion that a woman's worth is solely determined by marriage and domestic responsibilities. Through Neela's journey, *Victory Song* underscores the ongoing battle against cultural norms that restrict women's independence.

Education plays a significant role in Neela's transformation. Unlike many young girls of her time, she is exposed to progressive ideas through her interactions with those involved in India's independence movement. This exposure fuels her determination to break free from societal expectations. She comes to understand that education is not just a tool for personal advancement but also a means of empowerment that enables individuals to challenge systemic oppression. The novel highlights that access to knowledge and the ability to think critically are essential for any movement toward equality and independence.

Her defiance does not mean outright rejection of her heritage but rather a demand for evolution within it. She recognizes that traditions have value, but she also believes they should not come at the expense of personal freedom. This nuanced approach to rebellion makes her character relatable and her struggle deeply meaningful. Neela's courage to question and challenge the status quo serves as an

inspiration, highlighting the importance of education and exposure in fostering progressive thought.

Neela's personal struggle for autonomy mirrors India's larger battle for independence. Just as the country seeks to break free from British rule, Neela longs to escape the societal constraints that dictate her future—especially in the form of an arranged marriage. Her acts of defiance, whether through questioning authority, seeking education, or resisting imposed traditions, embody the same rebellious spirit that fueled the independence movement.

This parallel reinforces the idea that oppression exists in many forms—political, cultural, and personal. The fight for national independence in India was not just about removing colonial rulers but also about reexamining and transforming deeply rooted societal structures that restricted individual freedoms. Neela's journey illustrates that true freedom goes beyond political liberation; it includes the right to personal choice, self-expression, and autonomy.

Her struggle also highlights the role of women in historical movements. While history often emphasizes the contributions of male leaders, *Victory Song* brings attention to the fact that women were equally active in resisting oppression. Whether by challenging societal norms within their homes or participating in political activism, women played a crucial role in shaping the future of the nation. Neela's personal revolution is a microcosm of the larger shifts occurring in Indian society, demonstrating that social change often begins with individual acts of courage.

Though set in the 1940s, Neela's story remains deeply relevant in today's world. Many of the issues she faces—gender inequality, cultural expectations, and the struggle for personal freedom—continue to affect women globally. Even in contemporary society, arranged marriages, limited access to education, and restrictive gender roles persist in various forms.

In many parts of the world, women still face barriers to autonomy, whether in the form of legal restrictions, economic dependency, or societal expectations. Neela's journey serves as a reminder that the fight for gender equality is ongoing. Her story encourages readers to question societal norms, advocate for education, and support movements that empower individuals to make their own choices.

Furthermore, Neela's transformation illustrates the importance of representation in literature. Stories like *Victory Song* provide young readers with role models who challenge the status quo. By showcasing strong female protagonists who refuse to conform to oppressive traditions, such narratives inspire future generations to pursue their own paths, regardless of societal expectations.

Conclusion:

In *Neela: Victory Song*, the themes of marriage, freedom, and cultural expectations shape Neela's transformation from an obedient girl into a determined

young woman who challenges the societal norms imposed upon her. Her resistance to arranged marriage and restrictive traditions mirrors her growing awareness of self-worth and independence, aligning with India's broader struggle for freedom. The novel serves as an inspiration, encouraging readers to reflect on the importance of personal choice, gender equality, and the courage to challenge unjust societal constraints. Even today, Neela's story remains relevant, as women across the world continue to fight for education, autonomy, and equal rights. By drawing connections between historical and contemporary struggles, *Victory Song* reinforces the idea that the fight for freedom—whether personal or societal—is ongoing. Neela's journey is a timeless and empowering narrative that celebrates resilience and self-determination.

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