

Two girls with the courage to change their world

[Life](#), [Emotions](#)



Although most humans are born free, they can live life bound by the barriers and expectations of society. The novels *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* and *Sister Wife* focus on female protagonists who break out of the moulds their societies place them in and form their own identities. In this essay, I will argue that these novels show how feminism has a positive impact on society and on the individuals who practise it. To do this, I will analyze how the cultures restricted females, how each protagonist resisted conformity, and the successful conclusion each character reached.

In *The Sweetness of the Bottom of the Pie*, the main character, Flavia DeLuce, epitomizes the struggles women faced for equality in England during the 1950's. In the aftermath of World War II, a new emphasis was placed on the nuclear family as the foundation of society. Although during the war many women worked outside the home and participated in the war effort, after its end they were encouraged to assume roles of wives and mothers as the government aimed to re-establish domesticity as women's primary occupation. The fictional town of Bishops Lacey was no different.

Women were expected to perform domestic work or jobs considered to be specific to their gender, such as a cook or librarian, and men were expected to perform the superior roles, such as detectives, professors or priests. The society Flavia was raised in expected females to be dependent and accepting of their male superiors. Flavia, the protagonist of the novel, can be described as an independent, self-reliant, and persistent eleven year old. Throughout the novel, her feminist qualities and resistance to the moulds of her culture are evident.

Flavia verbally declares on several occasions that she is just as capable, if not more so, than her male counterparts: “ Yes, I’d solve this case and present it to him wrapped up in gaily colored ribbons” (95). In this statement Flavia affirms her belief that she has the ability to solve the case just as effectively as the male detectives. Similarly, Sister Wife’s main character, Celeste, questions the inferior place of women and their lack of rights in the context of a polygamous community. Celeste was born in Unity, home to The Movement, a conservative religious group that lives apart from mainstream, modern society.

Unity is a society based on conformity and unwavering obedience, especially when it comes to women. Women in this society are not granted the option to choose; before they are born, their roles in society are already planned, “ Fathers and mothers ... from the time your daughter can crawl, you must teach her that she does not belong to you but to the prophet and the man the prophet will assign her to in marriage. Only these men... can take your daughters to the highest degree of the celestial kingdom” (33).

This statement, spoken by the prophet, clearly shows the roles of women in Unity and their dependence on the male figures that dominate their society. Celeste, who can be described as an opinionated and individualistic young girl, has to hide aspects of her natural personality to find acceptance in Unity. Celeste begins to question the ways of The Movement as the day when she will be assigned to a husband draws near. She does not want to be married at 15; she seeks higher aspirations, such as “ an education, a career, to fall in

love and chose her own husband, to be independent and think for herself” (264).

However, Unity would never permit Celeste to do any more than become a celestial wife. A celestial wife is a term commonly used in polygamous communities meaning heavenly or holy wife; a woman can be considered a celestial wife when their husband marries more than one women. This forces Celeste to decide whether to conform to the roles laid out for her, or to resist her male dominated society. In the novel *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, Flavia, contrary to Celeste, avidly verbally and physically, defies her male dominated society.

Flavia hates being undermined and judged based on her gender instead of her abilities; “‘why it’s only a girl,’ ‘ I could’ve slapped his face,’” (242).

These statements occur after Flavia is caught breaking into a boysboarding school. When a teacher notices her he calls the police, assuming that she was a boy and therefore a legitimate threat to security. However, when he discovers that she is a girl, he apologizes for alerting the cops and claims that if he knew, he could have easily dealt with the situation.

In *Bishops Lacey*, many male figures decide the scope of Flavia’s abilities before they get to know her; as a result Flavia receives great joy in proving them wrong. In the beginning of the novel, Flavia discovers a dead body in her front yard. Instead of initiating the expected female response of running to get help, Flavia kneels over the body and exclaims, “ I wish I could say I was scared, but I wasn’t. Quite the contrary. This was by far the most interesting thing that had ever happened to me in my entire life” (29).

Although Flavia wakes Dogger, a maintenance worker in the De Luce home, she takes care of the dead body herself.

Flavia calls the police, confirms that the victim is dead, and is the first to greet the detectives when they arrive. Her natural ability to remain calm and take control of the situation is very uncharacteristic of the females in Bishops Lacey. Ms. Mullet's response to the situation is much less refined: " Oh, good Lord! " (14). Later, when Flavia's father is charged with the murder, she cannot just watch as men try to wrongly convict him of the crime: " My duty was to my father and it had fallen upon my shoulders to help him" (152).

Despite the detective's setbacks, Flavia begins to unravel the mystery which will free her father and prove that she is just as capable of solving the case. During her journey to discover the truth, Flavia ignores the rules created by the men in her life, such as ignoring the detective's obvious worry for her safety, her father's pleas for her to " Go home," and unlawfully breaking into a hotel room and a clock tower (173). Flavia's determination and unwillingness to rely on men are admiral qualities; however, they do place her in serious danger. Near the end of the mystery Flavia is kidnapped by the murderer Frank Pemberton.

Although this is the first time in the novel she shows fear, Flavia still refuses to submit to his demands. Despite the fact that she is physically bound and unable to resist, she believes she can still conquer Pemberton with her wit. Throughout the novel *Sister Wife*, Celeste also defies the male dominance in her society; however, she does this in a much subtler way. Through the majority of the novel, Celeste mentally resents the restrictions and roles of

women in her society; however, physically, she seems to follow and obey the laws laid down by men.

This is one of the major differences between the two characters, as Flavia could be characterized as a woman of action whereas Celeste could be described as a woman of thoughts. At the beginning of the novel, Celeste seems to be the perfect daughter: she is obedient and respectful of her culture. However as more of her character is revealed, the reader discovers that Celeste is consumed with thoughts of a life outside Unity. Within the community, Celeste's lifestyle is so structured that " a person doesn't really need to think at all" (11).

Yet, Celeste still doubts the system and finds it impossible to accept the prophet's laws without questioning them: " God is not in the religious ranting, he's not in the rules or the sacred book. He is here in this beauty of this divine morning" (129). When Celeste meets a young, attractive boy named Jon, she begins to believe that she should have the right to fall in love with a boy her own age. Although Celeste and Jon's relationship is banned in Unity and considered blasphemy, neither character can stop romantically seeing the other. Celeste wonders whether " it's time for her to change things....

Refuse to be assigned to a husband" (49). This shows Celeste's feminist tendencies and her subtle way of resisting her society. However, Celeste's loyalty and love for her family prevents her from acting on her desires. When Celeste and Jon are caught, he begs her to leave with him: "Celeste you know you don't want this life"; she responds: " But I also

know that I cannot disgrace my family'" (142). After Jon's departure, the whole community becomes aware of Celeste's indiscretion and Celeste reaches a new level of despair. She laments that " What Daddy wants is right for him.

Nobody asked me if being a celestial wife was right for me; if they had I would have said no" (148). Celeste begins to feel like a caged animal and every movement becomes an effort. This leads the reader to conclude that without the right to think independently and make decisions for oneself, people can lose the very essence of what makes them human. The days begin to blur for Celeste and soon she finds herself engaged to Jon's father. It does not matter how much she is repulsed by the idea of her new husband; Celeste cannot leave Unity and in the end she chooses to marry the one the Lord reveals for her.

In the end, Flavia's resistance to the gender inequality in her society changes Bishops Lacey forever. When sitting in a room alone with a raging murderer, Flavia realizes that there are no miracles in Bishops Lacey. If she wants to live she " must make things happen for herself" (315). Flavia knows that " humans were incapable of accepting their own helplessness," (316) and as a result they have become survivors. She was not giving up without a fight, and although she knew that she could not escape alone, she physically fought Pemberton with everything she had.

Flavia proclaimed that " Napoleon had once called the English a nation of shopkeepers... but we were a nation of survivors, and I, Flavia Sabina De Luce, could see it even in myself," (331). Even as the strength leaves her

body, Flavia stalls Pemberton using her knowledge of the murders he had committed, hopefully buying her rescuer the time he needs. In moments, Dogger arrives, freeing Flavia from Pemberton's grasp. When Flavia is freed from the pit she had been concealed in, the residents of Bishops Lacey no longer view her as just a girl.

They regard her as " somehow a different Flavia than the one", they knew " only two days ago" (349). Flavia will forever be remembered as the girl with enough courage to defy all the odds and uncover the truth. The symbolism of her heroic journey is evident as Pemberton is arrested in complete darkness and her father is released in the light that followed. The idea of darkness becoming light also symbolized the rebirth of Bishops Lacey, as their previous view that " females were disadvantaged by nature" (275) had been proven false by Flavia's actions.

In the weeks that follow her kidnapping, Flavia comes to be perceived as an equal in her community, consulted by the detectives and police. As a result her independence flourishes. In contrast, Celeste's resistance to the gender inequality in her society changes her life forever by providing her with enough strength to follow her dreams. Celeste does not find any more happiness in married life than in life with her biological family and feels as though she has " been sentenced to a life without hope.

My heart feels as though it will never heal" (246). This statement reveals the psychological realities of many women trapped within the system of polygamy. To keep a level of sanity, Celeste creates Inukshuks; this allows her to regain some control in her life and feel connected to the earth. As

male dominance leaves little room for female imagination, Celeste manages to express herself through her creations and this ends up saving her soul: “When I concentrate on rocks, I forget everything else, and for those short hours I experience peace” (246).

The idea of using an element of creation to explain one’s society and her place in it is a common theme shared by both novels. In *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, Flavia uses chemistry to express her creativity and knowledge, using chemical analogies to explain her world. After only a few months of marriage, Celeste becomes pregnant, and as a result, her devastation increased because a child would forever bind her to Unity. But on the first day of spring her daughter, Hope, is born, and suddenly everything in Celeste’s world changes.

She wants her daughter to have everything she did not have: “I may not have been strong enough to leave Unity for myself, but in this moment I know that I will find the strength to do it for her” (264). Celeste’s dream of escape become reality when she leaves Unity a few months after her daughter is born. The courage to believe that society should have a place where everyone is equal is the foundation of feminism in both the novels *Sister Wife* and *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*. The two female protagonists defy the male dominance in their societies and discover who they truly are.

Each character faces the obstacle of a very repressive culture and yet, are able to summon the courage of the feminists who lived before them to resolve the conflicts of their time. Though Flavia’s resolution had more of an

immediate impact than Celeste's, by leaving Unity, Celeste set a new precedent for girls in polygamous communities and helped others realize that there is a way out. Therefore, it is justified to claim that both girls resolved aspects of gender inequality in their societies. These unique women have positively impacted society and contributed to the rights and freedoms modern women enjoy.