Although most humans are born free, they can live life bound by the barriers and expectations of society. Alan Bradley’s, The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie focuses on a female protagonist who breaks out of the moulds her society places her in and forms her own identity. In this essay, I will argue that this novels shows how feminism has a positive impact on society and on the individuals who practice it. To do this, I will analyze how the cultures restricted females, how the protagonist resisted conformity, and the successful conclusion the 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 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.

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 boys boarding 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.

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.

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 The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie, Flavia uses chemistry to express her creativity and knowledge, using chemical analogies to explain her world.

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.

Works Cited

Bradley, Alan. The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie. Canada: Anchor Canada, 2009.Print.