

# Conservative Manifestations of Women in Turkey: Deliberations on the Case of Samiha Ayverdi

Türkiye Muhafazakârlığında Kadın Tasavvuru: Samiha Ayverdi Örneği Üzerinden Bir Değerlendirme

Ceren Avcil\* 

Ağrı İbrahim Çeçen University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Ağrı, Türkiye

## Abstract

Conservatism has enjoyed a consistently high position on the current agenda as an important part of daily life, appearing in the form of an ideology or a way of thinking. Conservatism, through its unbreakable bond with the past and its ways of articulating with other ideologies, brings to the fore varied forms of conservatism differing in line with geographical origins and environmental conditions. The gist of conservative thinking considers the past to maintain its presence today on one hand and to bear the torch for the future on the other. The present study focuses on Samiha Ayverdi, one of the pioneers of conservative thinking in Turkey. Ayverdi depicts a critical approach to daily life on the line between modernisation and conservatism and focuses on the transformations brought along by westernisation during the process of modernisation engulfing Turkey at the time. Ayverdi takes ownership of the past and takes only wary steps towards the novelties produced by the process of westernisation, as dictated by the delimitation of conservatism. Ayverdi's perspective erodes the image of the Muslim women. In comparison between Turkey and the Ottoman Empire, Ayverdi opts for the latter as a structure dominated by a conservative identity for women.

**Keywords:** Conservatism, Conservatism in Turkey, Samiha Ayverdi, Woman.

## Öz

Muhafazakârlık, bir ideoloji veya düşünce biçimi şeklinde gündelik hayatın önemli bir parçası olarak gündemde yerini korumaktadır. Gerek geçmiş ile olan ayrılmaz bağı, gerekse de ideolojiler ile eklenme biçimi bakımından muhafazakârlık içinde doğup büyüdüğü coğrafya ve koşullar itibarıyla farklı muhafazakârlıkları da gündeme getirmektedir. Muhafazakâr düşüncenin temelinde geçmiş bir yandan bugündür, diğer yandan da geleceğin meşalesi konumundadır. Bu çalışmada, Türkiye muhafazakârlık düşüncesinin öncü isimlerinden biri olan Samiha Ayverdi üzerinde durulmaktadır. Ayverdi'nin geçmişe duyduğu özlem ile içinde yaşadığı dönemi şekillendirme çabası, gündelik hayatın muhafazakâr ideoloji ile eklenmesinin çarpıcı bir örneğidir. Modernleşme ile muhafazakâr çizgi arasında gündelik hayata eleştirel bir yaklaşım tarzı sergileyen Ayverdi, Türkiye'nin içine girmiş olduğu modernleşme sürecine batılılaşma eksenindeki dönüşümlere odaklanmaktadır. Geçmişin mirasını sahiplenen Ayverdi, batılılaşma sürecinin getirmiş olduğu yeniliklere muhafazakârlık çerçevesinde temkinli yaklaşmaktadır. Müslüman kadın imgesi Ayverdi'nin bakış açısıyla erozyona uğramaktadır. Cumhuriyet Türkiyesi ile Osmanlı İmparatorluğu dönemi kıyaslamasında Ayverdi muhafazakâr kadın kimliğinin baskın olduğu ikinci ön plana çıkarmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Muhafazakârlık, Türkiye Muhafazakârlığı, Samiha Ayverdi, Kadın.

\* Corresponding Author / Sorumlu Yazar: [cavcil@agri.edu.tr](mailto:cavcil@agri.edu.tr)

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## **Conservative Manifestations of Women in Turkey: Deliberations on the Case of Samiha Ayverdi**

The infiltration of Western-oriented thinking and lifestyles into the social fibre coincides with the dawn of modernisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Republic of Turkey, a country that upheld this approach as a prominent ideal in her efforts to overcome national underdevelopment on one hand and started to experience social reconstruction shaped by the modern patterns originating from the West on the other. Considering how the practice and means of modernisation typically give rise to social assent and dissent at the same time, in the specific case of Turkey, this process appeared to give rise to varying degrees and forms of effects on the actors representing the main social dynamics, such effects being embodied in attitudes towards change and transformation accompanied by reactionary protests against the rising combination of social values and judgments. Conservative thinking has been a typical part of this reactionary attitude. “This conservative attitude which we observe to have emerged as a reaction to Ottoman-Turkish modernisation demands partial and gradual change against the radical revolutions and calls for change of the Republic” (Özekmekçi & Komşuoğlu, 2013, p. 36).

Finding themselves in the midst of the historical processes of revolution, war, or internal turmoil, etc., women were positioned as an undeniably important element for this wind of change. At this intersection, the outlook on women in the context of modernisation in Turkey focused on their articulation with ideological conservatism, which created a new typology for women as an alternative to that in modernisation: The conservative Muslim woman of Anatolia. Befitting this typology perfectly, Samiha Ayverdi (1905-1993) was an important woman actor deriving her background from the early years of the Republic, as well as her conservative identity, who made it her essential mission to reinforce maintain the native and national Turkish identity, culture, morals, and consciousness. In her works, Ayverdi adopted an attitude that accordingly argued for social reconstruction based on national values and tended to offer a guide for daily life on the tightrope between the past and the future, one that was riddled with reminders of the past.

Samiha Ayverdi is an author who portrayed the circumstances of her time in the context of conservatism in Turkey and managed to keep her legacy alive to the present day. Her life covered the period between 1905 and 1993 and she was tutored privately in history, literature, Islamic Sufism, and philosophy during her years of study. What is more, Ayverdi also gravitated towards Islamic resources and Eastern literature in her works with this gravitation leading her to create works that gave new life to the Turkish-Islamic culture. In addition, Ayverdi served as a bridge between the past and our present day owing to prominent references to Sufi belief and thinking in her works (Demirci, 2018, pp. 14-15).

The present study focused on Samiha Ayverdi as one of the significant figures in Turkey in the context of conservatism with particular attention to her views on women and family. Conservatism in Turkey is distinctly characterised by the way it managed not to be followed by a radical break from the past owing to its close ties with nationalism and Islamism. Its togetherness with Islamism and nationalism, in fact, represents an important factor that played an extremely significant role in the shaping of the conservatist approach to women and family. Samiha Ayverdi is a thinker who adopted this approach in her life, as well as in her works. Essentially, Ayverdi is positioned among the thinkers who made their mark on their time not as followers, but critics of modernisation. In Ayverdi’s thinking, the ideal woman is as tradition-bound as she is socially strong, educationally well-nurtured, and carefully avoidant of any power-grabbing competition with the man. Stressing women’s role as mothers in raising future generations, Ayverdi entrusts them with the role of carrying over national awareness, tradition, and culture to the new generation. In her denial of the fictionality of gender, Ayverdi advises that by “nature”, women cannot be equal with men. Even though Ayverdi refrains from affording an equal position to women in relation to men, she does uphold the role of motherhood she imposes on

women within the framework of Islamic values, a role which she emphasises to be a quality that is exclusive to women.

The present study is based on a research of secondary resources and a literature review. In this scope, authors consulted various resources including printed and electronic books (novels and stories) and journals, etc. The study is instrumental for an understanding of how discourse and thinking in today's discussions of women and family are shaped within the framework of the time period and relevant circumstances. It is possible to refer to the study as a source of important clues for ascertaining whether the forms and roles attributed in conservatism to women and family have undergone a process of transformation by reason of the new patterns and ways of thinking brought along by modernisation.

### **Conservatism: A Theoretical Approach Based on Definitions, Rise, and Principles**

Conservatism is an ideology and a movement of thought advanced along a unique axis shaped by its proprietary principles, unique transformation, and promised values. In fact, there is an ongoing debate as to whether conservatism is an ideology or a movement of thought; this debate rises on the twofold of providing an exact definition for conservatism. One aspect of these challenges come from the tight bond between tradition and conservatism, while the latter is the result of conservative cynicism towards conventional ideologies and views, which adds further difficulties to the consistency of conservatism and its definition as a systematic ideology (Erdoğan, 2006, p. 5).

These challenges haven't been able to curb the efforts to offer a range of definitions for conservatism, however, and conservatism is defined, in its most generic form:

...to refer to a political philosophy, shaped by criticisms penned by writers, thinkers, and politicians, that has emerged in protest to the 'Enlightenment'; to the enlightened understanding of reason; to any political projects emanating from such reason; and any suggestions or practices pertaining to social transformation shaped by such political projects and that endeavours to restrict rationalist politics and protect the society from such projects of social transformation (and from their authors), as well as the tradition of thought and the political ideology built on these foundations in time. Conservatism has survived to our modern day and will continue to do so by carrying with it a backbone embodied in a critical build-up established by contemporary dissidents who argue for evolutionary or gradual change against revolutionary transformation and point to a future disaster arising from secularisation itself and its erosion of the solidarist social structure (Özipek, 2017, p.18)

Therefore, conservatism stands against the rationalist concept of reason as a tenet of Enlightened thinking and challenges an approach to the future shaped exclusively by projections and any effort to transform the traditional values that cement the society. Rising on reactions and dissent towards social modernisation, conservatism "finds its foundations in reactions manifested against capitalist modernisation with impetus from an ideal to maintain the political, social, and cultural structures targeted by modernisation or rather, the meanings and values attributed to such structures" (Bora, 2017, p. 54). Conservatism is characterised with a modern ideological structure in its distanced

and even critical attitude towards, or its refusal of, the meaning and value attributed to anything new. Mannheim describes conservatism as both a universal and eternal way of thinking that is unique to each age and as a modern way of thinking emerging as a product of the circumstances characterising our current age (Güler, 2016, p. 117). In this context, conservatism is a melting pot of claims of modernity and traditionalism and this structure finds more meaning in distinct classifications of “traditionalism” and “modernity” (Nisbet, 2019, p. 106). In an effort to define conservatism with a different perspective, Huntington (1957, pp. 454-455) defines conservatism ideologically as a system of ideas concerned with the distribution of political and social values and adopted by a significant social group. These definitions clearly indicate how conservatism idealises a society built on traditions in economic, political, and cultural terms.

The opinions concerning the advent of conservatism move along two distinct axes, the first of which is described as a movement that emerged in the aftermath of the French Revolution to pursue conservatism in a series of efforts to defend the hierarchical order in the former regime, oppose individualism, and challenges various aspects of industrialisation with a touch of disdain towards reason. The second axis, however, describes conservatism as a way of perceiving the world and a behavioural pattern that aims to preserve relationships and their network rather than as a way of thinking strictly fixed in its content (Demirel, 2004, p. 67). Beneton (2016, pp. 7-11) points out to the French origins of the term “conservatism” in politics and to its subsequent adventures branching out into the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and the United States of America, all diversified in the meaning and implications of the concept. According to Beneton, conservatism is, in all eventuality, an intellectual and political movement that appeared in modern times as a stand against the same modernity.

Although conservatism moulds into a different shape in every society on the basis of its unique set of internal dynamics and circumstances, Çaha (2016, p. 109) establishes four basic groups for the factors leading to the rise of conservatism. The first group of factors come from Enlightened thinking, which is built on a rational approach to the mind and the individual as one of its fundamental principles. In its essence, conservatism has a pessimistic outlook on the mind with references to the limited capacity of the mind and the imperfect nature of the individual. Conservatism argues that in fact, the notion of reason promoted by Enlightened thinking is a work of fiction and is far from offering a realistic reflection of human nature (Duman, 2009, p. 160), with the mind failing to offer a guide for social construction. However, it should be noted that conservatism does not deny abstract reason in its entirety as it merely tends to approach the notion of abstract mind developed through Enlightened thinking in the confines of the historical context (Öğün, 2021, p. 554).

The second group of factors emanate from the ideas of political, economic, and social change brought along by the French Revolution of 1789 (Heywood, 2019, p. 91). The “revolutionary political practice” (Çaha, 2016, p. 111) emerging through the Revolution attracted pronounced reactions from conservatives; such reaction against revolution then became a tenet for conservative politics, because conservatives believed that the French Revolution destroyed what Burke called the “inns and resting places of the human soul” or the institutions that bridged the society and the people (Güngörmez, 2003, pp.151-152). The abrupt and radical break from the past embodied in the French Revolution represents an important starting point for conservatives. In this respect, conservative politics find the right way for political change in a gradual, rather than abrupt, process (Duman, 2009, pp.162-163). Then, why is it that conservatives argue for gradual change? They believed that movements of reform could create some adverse outcomes and a revolution could destroy the institutions that held the society together as an organism, which, they argue, did actually happen during the French Revolution. To them, using

rationality as the basis for politics was effectively a denial of the limited capacity of humans and of the resulting gaps in the knowledge required for the proposed change (Özipek, 2021, p. 69).

The third group of factors come from “revolutionary utopian socialist movements”. Conservatives appeared to be rather reactive towards the idea of eliminating private property, which was often referred to in Marx’s ideas and eventually found an easy articulation in liberal thinking, as well as such social structures as family, state, morals, and law (Çaha, 2016, p. 112).

Finally, the most important group of factors leading to the advent of conservatism stems from the social structure that came out the other end of transformation started by the industrial revolution. In the eyes of conservatives, this new social structure brought about with the process of industrialisation caused disruptions in interpersonal relationships in family, kinship, and religion, triggered a process of disintegration and alienation, and undermined the sense of solidarity and common action in the society (Çaha, 2016, p. 113).

If conservatism is the product of a turbulent journey through modernity, then what are its underlying principles and the principal arguments it stands against? What do conservatives actually want to conserve? What were the values they thought were lost during this process? Conservatism focuses on the social structure as a concept of importance, which they believe is the essential factor that shapes an individual. Therefore, the existence of the society predates the individual. In this sense, conservatism rejects individualism and places the society before the individual in an order of priority. To them, the society follows an organismic structure contrary to an atomised one purported by liberal thinking. The organismic social structure entails an organic unity of the elements that make up a society, brought together in functional interdependency. This conclusion holds as much water in the society as in social relationships. An individual will act within the confines of certain limitations and requirements. Therefore, approaches championed by Enlightened thinking on the basis of “free will”, the “social contract”, and “rights” are, in fact, imaginative approaches rising upon an incorrect premise. The element of tradition is the most important point of reference for the social structure as it is the backbone that maintains continuity and stability in a society. The foundations of a society lie in the institutions operating within (Duman, 2009, p. 161). The primary reasoning behind this importance attached to tradition is based on its ability to create a sense of identity for the society, as well as for the individual. Traditions instil a sense of security in an individual by way of maintaining past practices, while also reinforcing the bond between the individual and the society by building a bridge between the individual and the past. In contrast, change is a source of uncertainty and insecurity and a cause for unhappiness (Heywood, 2019, p. 96). In brief, conservatism considers tradition as a tool for security, stability, and happiness. An emphasis on values accompanies tradition in establishing the basis for conservative thinking. Conservative thinking attributes the meaning in a society along the axis of values and accordingly, maintains its existence along with the other ideologies by way of its pursuit of “commitment to values” and “appraisal of values” (Baker, 2021, p. 104). Family relationship, neighbourly relations, religion, traditions, and customs represent significant values in the preservation and continuation of the social structure (Çaha, 2019, p. 143). Tradition emerging as one of the mainstays in conservative thinking is a natural effect of its claims to a separation from the past and the future (Çiğdem, 2021, p. 29).

Consequently, the principles that build the foundations of conservative thinking are in harmony with its ideal social structure. Its contemplation of the individual as an inherently imperfect structure that is far from being all-powerful at any given time, coupled with its tendency towards gradual rather than abrupt change and its ideal of social patterns based on tradition, entails a political structure shaped around moderation. It comes as no surprise, then, that an abstract perception of the individual

represented the main topic in the discourse of ideological conservatism both during the French Revolution and in its response to Enlightened thinking.

### **Conservatism in Turkey: Background and Trivets**

There has been an increase in the number of studies considering conservatism outside the confines of such overbearing concepts as “reactionism” or “fundamentalism” to secure a better understanding of conservatism in Turkey; however, this increase has apparently failed to bridge the gaps in the literature offering an in-depth look into Western conservatism (Güngörmez, 2014, p.163).

In Turkey, conservative thinking has historically played a balancing act, finding itself moving closer to modernisation while keeping a distance at the same time (Genç & Coşkun, 2015, p. 37). This ambivalent approach in conservatism may also be construed as an outcome of its articulation with other ideologies and mentalities. At this point, while Bora (2017) argues that ideological conservatism goes hand in hand with nationalism and Islamism, Çiğdem (2021, pp. 47-48) opposes this argument by singling out the case of Islamism, which she believes has called itself into being through its distance to modernisation combined with its pursuit of its own definition of the new. In this context, “conservatism” is not a tenet in Islamism. “Even when Islamism surrendered to a reactionary rhetoric, it has clearly refrained from falling into ‘reactionism’ per se and held its ground not with conservatism bound by a duty to conserve or maintain what is, but with an ahistorical approach sanctifying the past or, albeit in a doomed effort, bringing the past to the present day.” Çiğdem (2021) describes the advent of Turkish conservatism as follows:

When considered in the face of its Western counterpart, Turkish conservatism will be inevitably plotted against the republic. The relationship between Turkish conservatism and the republic is identical in nature to the one between modernity and conservatism: Turkish conservatism is an ideology of the republic and has made its own existence possible only in the backdrop built by the republic (p. 50).

This wording can lead us to conclude that conservatism in Turkey was not a radical break emerging as a reaction to the havoc wreaked by the French Revolution of 1789 in economic, social, political, and cultural patterns. This is notably a function of the intertwined nature of the elements that typically feed history in the context of Turkey. At this point, conservatism in Turkey stands out as an amalgamation of elements borrowed from Islamism and nationalism. Conservatism, nationalism, and Islamism are able to articulate with each other through the bonds of history and appear to have stayed away from any changes that may be described as radical in the history of Turkey.

Conservatism lives in a world of duality revolving around the impossible togetherness of change and resistance to change and this duality becomes apparent also when it comes to conservatism in Turkey. The crux of this duality saw the ideology torn between Western modernisation that had already started with the Ottoman Tanzimat (Reform) Era and the reformist endeavours rising from the seeds planted with the proclamation of the Republic. In fact, pre-Republican Turkey gave birth to new Republic of Turkey and this succession makes it difficult also to put forward any arguments on “conservatism” and “progressivism” (Tezel, 2021, p. 22). On the other hand, some authors argue that ideological conservatism in Turkey has not found as impactful and important an embodiment as it has in the West reportedly due to the priority given to reforms and improvements rather than a full-blown revolution with a view to preserving unity and solidarity in the country. Here, there is a specific

argument indicating that the politicians had become aware of and been influenced by Western thinking and the thoughts emanating from the French Revolution along with the Second Constitutionalist Period, leaving them no time or room thereafter to occupy themselves with such matters as gradual change, preserving traditional institutions, or staying away from radical change (Özipek, 2021, pp. 75-79).

Ayvazoğlu (2013, p. 203-204) argues that in cultural terms, modernisation was dominated by an ideal of constructing “a national identity”, which, however, was to be the main instrument for a complete break from Islamic and Ottoman values. In fact, the Alphabet Reform of 1928 is an important example for the cultural concretisation of this break. Ayvazoğlu (2013,) uses the following wording to describe a new alphabet and effectively a new language breaking all ties with the legacy of the past:

...At a pace that is unprecedented and unlikely to be replicated in the history of any other nation, the entire nation but for a small minority had lost their literacy; books, newspapers, and magazines had dropped out of circulation; and calligraphers, copyreaders, and musicians, etc. had been left unemployed (pp. 203-204).

Ayvazoğlu (2013) describes this process as one of “vandalism”, which may be regarded as a reaction against the cultural aspects of modernisation. Gökalp (2010,) criticises the nationalistic element in the modernisation process brought along by the Ottoman reforms as follows:

Those that went along with the tide of ‘modernisation’ believed that it was possible to achieve the ideal nation out of various social groups and sects living together while spreading their reformist ideas and followed this thinking to merely slap a new meaning, one entirely stripped of national colours, onto the historically meaningful ‘Ottoman’ label. Rather tragic experience has shown, however, that there was no other group in the society that adopted the new meaning attached to the ‘Ottoman’ label than the Reformist Turks. This new meaning not only remained ineffective in its outcomes, but also gave way to extremely detrimental results for the state, social elements, and especially Turks (p. 12).

Turkish conservatism did not entail any radical break in politics yet nor was it able to restrain a reactive discourse towards a number of social elements including culture, nation and nationality, and tradition.

### **Manifestations of the Conservative Approach to Women and Family in the Thinking of Samiha Ayverdi**

Attempts at modernisation following the proclamation of the Republic attracted criticism from a thinker of her time, Samiha Ayverdi, who argued that modernisation undermined the fundamental structure and elements of the society. Samiha Ayverdi is observed to have reserved a lot of room in her thoughts, works, and speeches for images of women and family shaped along the axis of conservatism and nationalism. It is notably impossible to separate Ayverdi’s thoughts on women from the economic, social, political, and cultural context of her time. “Her life story bore witness to the social and political birthing pains of modernisation in the years following the country from the Ottoman Empire to the

Republic of Turkey and this, along with her intellectual background, led her to author works in hopes of offering guidance” (Özekmekçi & Komşuoğlu, 2013, p. 50). Therefore, this backdrop should be the absolute framework shaping any approach to the importance and roles attributed by Ayverdi to women and family as the building blocks of conservative thinking. Matters of women and family would undoubtedly find it impossible to stay clear of the tension between “the old” and “the new” in this process.

### ***Women and Family as Actors in Nation-Building***

Conservative thinking is guided by a compass of tradition as the legacy of the past and the roadmap of the future. However, it encounters a crux of tension between dogmatism from the legacy of the past and uncertainty from the foundations of the future. Women are without question a significant actor directly experiencing this tension. The role cast to women in conservative thinking is traditionally based on a more edged discrimination between women and men. Ideological conservatism approaches the past with a sense of longing and the future with cynicism and this approach plays a decisive role in relationships between genders. In fact, conservative thinking believes in protecting such concepts as “order”, “hierarchy”, “authority”, “tradition”, and “family” and in this context, gender inequality and patriarchal thinking represent inseparable parts of conservatism (Özman, 2020, p. 339).

The wave of transformation starting with modernisation had a profound effect on the society’s outlook on the family in general and on women specifically. Conservatism has, however, incorporated women and family as important elements for nation-building owing to its articulation with ideological nationalism. Women appear to have acted as a strategic actor in the nation-building process of the society. In fact, Sancar (2017) expresses his opinions on the articulation between nationalism and conservatism as follows:

Ideological nationalism tries to penetrate the society by its strategy of building ‘the new family’. Women become ‘biologized’ to the same extent as they are employed as a basic strategy for social construction. However, the distance between nationalism and conservatism and between conservatism and modernity become real when modernity internalises the ‘restoration of tradition’. As modernity grows further away from conservatism, a distinct family strategy comes into play, one that urges women to move closer to traditional patterns of behaviour; as social change picks up speed, women are defined more and more as the safe zone that ‘hold their ground, firm and steady’ in the family, thus making up for the ‘loss of manhood’ suffered by the patriarchal mentality (p. 146).

In the Ottoman Empire, the Tanzimat Era marked the advent of a period of duality both in the face of modernisation and at the crossroads of the East and the West, culture and civilisation, the traditional and the modern, and progressivism and reactionism (Çağlıyan İçener, 2016, p. 141). In this world of duality, the question of women permeated deep into the thinking of Ayverdi, who heavily criticised modernisation’s promise of a new image for women in contrast with the forgotten and lost image of women closely associated with the past. At this point, Samiha Ayverdi comes to the fore as an important figure in the construction of the image of women along the nationalist and conservative axis. Ayverdi redefines the construct of womanhood, moulding it within the case of the roles she



attributes to this concept. In her book *Râtibe*, Ayverdi (2017, pp. 34-35) addresses the relationships between women and men and states that Allah has given a supreme privilege to women in the form of motherhood, but rather than upholding this privilege, women choose to lower themselves, sticking to the argument for “equality between women and men” in an act of misguided and hollow determination.

Ayverdi casts a privileged role for motherhood in her outlook on women and describes this role as a supreme privilege afforded only to women among all living beings. Ayverdi, in her opinions, emphasises the influence of the parallel functions of nature and culture in the construct of women as also upheld by traditional patriarchal thinking. Ayverdi, with her statement that “we lower ourselves with this tired refrain of ‘equality between women and men’”, dismantles the entire feminist literature. The description of the roles imposed on women and men as a social construct in feminist literature (Akgül, 2021, p. 22) is considered to represent a “misguided and tired refrain”. With this statement, Ayverdi also effectively frustrates the claim that every person is born equal and free, a claim that constitutes one of the tenets of liberalism.

Conservatism attributes a distinct role to the family, which also found significant reflections in Ayverdi’s thinking. Indicating how Islamic elements are instrumental in moulding the Turkish family tradition, Ayverdi underlines the intergenerational transfer of history and tradition awareness. Describing history as “the greatest friend, the true friend” (Ayverdi, 2012, p. 43), Ayverdi idealises the “Turkish mother” as the main character for the continued unity of family. In her eyes, “heroic” mothers who had raised their children with the motto “The only way is veteranhood or martyrdom!” attained the proud privilege of sending their sons off to the army for their homeland and their faith (Ayverdi, 2016, pp. 32-34).

This spotlight placed on women by reason of their biological role of motherhood is surely not a mere matter of childbearing. Motherhood sustains itself also in the form of an overwhelmingly ideological symbol (Özman, 2020, p. 345). The ideological aspect of motherhood finds its bearings in the efforts to maintain the continuity of the nation. Women are indispensable for the survival of the nation and appear to enjoy an extension of the public space into the private space in the ways in which they are addressed in societal terms. Motherhood and childbearing are the distinguishing features for the exact positioning of women in the society. In fact, Ayverdi (2017) underlines both the positioning of women at the intersection of public and private spaces and the differences between the East and the West in terms of this delineation:

Western civilisations, including the U.S., are therefore raising generations of degenerates, as they have disrupted the natural balance, overstepping their original mandate, just like goods spoilt by defective manufacturing. In fact, most women racing against their men are now the property of nurseries, not their own. With nurseries, like factories, raising generations deprived of compassion, affection, and human qualities in a similar fashion to workshops producing defective goods, humanity succeeds in creating technical wonders on one hand, yet fails generations by destroying their spiritual and inner life on the other

Europe no longer enjoys any growth in her generations, in her population, either. This is because women come home from work all tired and exhausted, with no time left for

them to raise children. Even if they find the time, a state body, a factory-spirited nursery becomes the mother to their children. As they are too busy to breastfeed their children early in the morning, they find themselves forced to abandon their children in a state body and to leave their house in disarray before setting off to work (p. 36).

“Protection”<sup>i</sup>, as much as it is an important concept for the articulation between conservatism and Islamism, finds a different reflection in the thinking of Ayverdi. The distance Çiğdem previously attempted to place between Islamism and “protection” manifests itself in the works of Ayverdi as the fundamental goal when it comes to the family. Therefore, the protection-oriented approach in Ayverdi’s conservatism becomes more pronounced in her consideration of the family as the basic unit that must be protected. At this point, Ayverdi also joins the wave of thinkers who typically base their deliberations on comparisons between conservatism in Turkey and that in the Western world. As the family is the most important unit that secures the continuity of the society and the country, the fundamental duty of women must be to raise children in pursuit of this goal. Women have the primary responsibility for childcare and spirituality and the national consciousness will suffer as long as this responsibility is entrusted to others. In this respect, childbearing and motherhood boost the functionality of the private space and are even considered to represent the fundamental tools for the depiction of women as mothers in the society. Ayverdi once again underlines the important sanctity of motherhood as a human quality in her address of the Western example. Describing how women have gotten stuck between their work and home in a manner similar to the dichotomy between the East and the West, Ayverdi makes a point by indicating that women’s employment is an obstacle to motherhood, which is the primary duty of women in her eyes, and this, in turn, creates social problems and disruptions. In this sense, the role of motherhood gets separated from its founding context as it gets entrusted to state bodies.

Ayverdi uses strong statements to express her opinion that there is no equality between women and men and stands against the argument for gender being a social construct, advising that the roles of women and men have been defined by nature (2017, pp. 36-37): “Women and men were created to complement one another and their division of labour was established by nature; therefore, any ignorant cause arguing for an opposition or contention between them would be an impossible cause, one that has already been defeated.” Consequently, Ayverdi contrasts the idea of a woman being an individual by herself with the idea of an individual only made complete by a man. Being a divorced mother of two herself, Ayverdi states that women’s rights and freedoms would be secured at the desired level if Islam is practiced in the right way and women leave their personal pleasures aside and pursue raising “generations with national and spiritual awareness” instead (Binark 2002, as cited in Azak, 2021, p. 253).

The spotlight placed on the role of mothers, i.e. women, in nation-building also finds a reflection in Ayverdi’s opinions. In the context of the nation, women then become one of the main actors in ideological nationalism. Accordingly, Ayverdi pursues a nationalist vision in sanctifying motherhood and draws a similarity between motherhood and the nation, where she emphasises that women raise the sons of the nation to fulfil their duty of motherhood (Keleş, 2012, pp. 15-16).

Ayverdi regards the family as the guarantee for the continuation of the social structure; however, she refrains from looking back to the past and making a comparison between the old family and the new family (2014, pp. 100-101). According to Ayverdi, the old family structure was the most robust unit of the society, with the family itself positioned as a stronghold against possible attacks from the outside. However, at the current point, despite some exceptions of these families still present, there

has been a breakdown in the historically and traditionally rooted structure of the Turkish family structure. As individuals spend less time at home, they have even less time to take care of their homes and children and less of a bearing in this context. Ayverdi, bringing forward women's importance as mothers in the disciplinary and protective duties of the family, considers a mother as "the pilot who holds the flybridge of the family, never losing sight of the compass" (Ayverdi, 2014, p. 101).

The absolute importance attributed in ideological conservatism to the institution and function of the family finds even more sanctity in the thoughts of Ayverdi with references to the role of women as mothers. In this sense, conservatism in Turkey pursues the ideal of sustaining the society, which coincides with Ayverdi's imagination of a woman and a family distanced from modernisation. Ayverdi prefers spirituality to the formalist and materialistic change brought along by modernisation. In her thinking, the cycle of women-family-society-nation can only be kept moving by the trinity of history-tradition-spirituality.

### ***Diversifying Womanhood at the Crossroads of Modernity and Conservatism***

Conservative thinking argues for gradual change and this argument does find some room in Ayverdi's opinions; however, more pronounced implications of the identification of modernisation with abrupt, rather than gradual, change is observed in the diversifying range of manifestations of women at the crossroads of modernity and conservatism. While conservative thinking considered women primarily in the context of their functions of motherhood, as well as their roles in raising children, rebuilding the nation, maintaining social stability and continuity, and carrying over history, national awareness, and consciousness between generations, these functions were faced with changes along with the outcomes of modernisation. At this point, Ayverdi, in her book *Milli Kültür Mes'eleleri ve Maarif Davamız* (could be translated into English as "Matters of National Culture and Our Educational Action")<sup>ii</sup> (1976), compares "the women of yesterday and the women of today" and reaffirms the ideal of women she longs for:

...The old woman was not literate for the most part. But calling her ignorant would be as big a fallacy as it would be a mistake. In fact, the old woman had the advantage of verbal culture, which afforded her a formation of civilisation, conscience, and social affairs. As a result, she was a creature that was familiar with the realities of the country and that carried the native and national mark in her every attitude, emotion, and thought, in her lifestyle, and in the entirety of her worldly existence (pp. 290-291).

Ayverdi's longing for the "old woman" is the manifestation of a contemplation extending from the past to the future. This nostalgia brings to the mind the critique of the image of the "new woman" in ideological conservatism. According to Ayverdi, the "native and national" woman was the product of an order of nature that kept her active, functional, and dynamic in every part of life. The "verbal culture" is, on the other hand, an important element that secured the existence of women in the framework of spiritual values. Then, what was the change in circumstances that rained down such criticism on the "new woman"? Ayverdi (1976, p. 291) emphasises the role of a "system of nurture", handed down to the next generation as a material and spiritual whole, in her comparison between the old woman and the new, describing this system as the main distinguishing factor. This claim to a native and national identity, then, symbolises a woman rooted in her own culture and moulded by her native system of education.

Ayverdi, in her habit of attributing a spiritual meaning to education, underlines the roles this institution assumes in the dichotomy of the old women and the new; nurture, in this respect, functions as the key to education. However, Ayverdi (2014, p. 96) also expresses some reservation on the topic of education and goes on to classify certain groups of women. Ayverdi is rather cynical in her questioning of whether contemporary women are able to fulfil their duties as mothers despite their level of education and compares educated women with the “heroic” women of the past, effectively calling into question whether the “new” women are able “to instil in their children an equally strong faith or the same level of national consciousness”. The new system of education brought along by modernisation, in Ayverdi’s view, undermined the transformation of women, who conventionally represented the foundation of the society. Gökalp’s aforementioned critique of “modernisation” as a “useless” concept also finds a reflection in Ayverdi’s views.

In fact, the image Ayverdi draws for women is the quintessential conservative woman. A woman idealised on the basis of her dress sense, education, nurture, historical awareness, and home life is surely not too far removed from religious elements. Making a point of Islamic values in her views on women, Ayverdi (1976, pp. 369-372) states as a matter of inevitability that women are now working in the field, as well as outside of their home, due to the necessities arising from living conditions. Nevertheless, this phenomenon is not entirely unconfined or uncontrollable: “But this doesn’t necessarily mean that women should walk around in as little as her beach clothing or bare themselves naked, setting aside their sense of modesty, decency, and manners...”. Following this reproach, Aydemir spends some time on the Islamic attitude towards clothing and states that Islam is not interested in matters of clothing at the moment or, to be more exact, this is not a matter of relevance for Islam (1976, p. 372).

Ayverdi bases her understanding of the world on spiritual values, emphasising the unifying power of Islam. In this framework, Ayverdi doesn’t consider clothing as the main issue here and rather, points out to the external threats facing the Islamic world, writing “Our religion is in grave danger, but not for matters of women wearing short or long skirts”. At this point, Ayverdi signifies the unifying force of Islam as the greatest saviour humanity needs for survival (1976, pp. 379-381). Emphasising this unifying force again in the context of individual differences, Ayverdi (2019a, p. 105) posits that all Muslims must unite regardless of their ethnicity with her following statement: “There cannot be any question of ‘I and we against you’ in Islam. Being Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, Albanian, Bosnian, Georgian, Circassian, Black, or Abyssinian makes no difference. In fact, Islam does not separate, but unites and brings people together...”. In this respect, Ayverdi considers Islamism as a prominent guide in the preservation of the past and projecting the future. Religion generally is positioned as a determining factor in conservative thinking in that it is, in a sense, entrusted with the duty of redefining life within the confines of morality in the face of the negative and disruptive impact of modernism (Dural, 2004, p. 26).

As Ayverdi reminisces about the past, she also compares rural and urban women. In her book *Ibrahim Efendi Konağı* (2019b), Ayverdi considers women of the urban society in a comparison:

Women in this purposeless society would live their lives on the basis of narrow or limited ideas or the lack thereof, unaware of the past, indifferent to the present state, and disinterested in the future, and were, in a sense, happy with that. An unbridgeable gap had now appeared between these women and the women of the second or even the first generation before them. The urban women of the old times were, just like the rural women back then, among the active agents of

the homeland. Their most pleasant qualities were their resolve and self-denial to sacrifice their lives for what they believed in and for their faith. A midwife putting a new-born into the arms of its young mother would see a mother as resolute and determined as would be expected from the pride of a hero moulded in his love for the homeland and for the faith, so much so that she would greet her new-born by saying “The only way is veteranhood or martyrdom!” even before those rosy lips could have their first taste of milk. Yet now, in the eyes of this new woman, the homeland and the faith had invariably become nothing but the residue of a fairy tale long gone. Now, her child was to be raised not by her but by nannies, by wetnurses, and, more often than not, by governesses. For her, there was nothing left of motherhood but a fantasy, a pretext for pride (p. 227).

Ayverdi’s distant stance towards the image of the “new” woman brought along by modernisation becomes even more distinct when it comes to family and the homeland. The fabled “rural” woman gets to be canonised in Ayverdi’s thinking, because the “rural” woman is one that sticks to the values of the past and fulfils her duty as a mother by herself. Among others, Ayverdi appears to react harshly to how the “old” women handed over the duty of motherhood, which meant raising their children as prospective sacrifices for the homeland, to the “new” women who, in turn, entrusted it to childminders as a public service.

Ayverdi’s ideation of women as “heroes” is the product of an articulation between ideological conservatism and ideological nationalism. Nationalism identifying the woman with the homeland or the homeland with the woman in its discourses on gender is also an indication of the construction of the image of the woman. On that note, Najmabadi (2016, pp. 129-130) offers his take on the linking of women to the homeland in nation-building as follows: “The nationalist discourse has, for the most part, employed the representation of the homeland as a woman’s body to build a national identity based on the collectivity of men in a nation composed of brothers.” Protecting women throughout this process is equivalent to holding the borders and security of the homeland away from harm. The ideation of the woman as a “mother” is a guarantee for unity and solidarity among the sons who were tasked with defending the homeland (Tokdoğan, 2020, p. 332). Therefore, the coupling of the heroic mother in the conservative discourse with the motherland in the nationalist discourse marks the advent of the instrumentalization of women and their emergence as one of the prominent actors in nation-building.

The works Ayverdi penned during the period coinciding with modernization in Turkey represent the crux of the distance towards and the critique of the Western origins of modernization. However, the striking observation here is one of the mutually complementary and harmonious stance emerging at the intersection of conservatism, nationalism, and Islamism in terms of their approaches towards women. In fact, Bora (2017a, p. 7) states that nationalism, conservatism, and Islamism are each a “state of being” existing in complete harmony in their representation of the right wing. This harmony is the compilation of the concepts and content of the Turkish right wing coming from nationalism; the values and rituals of Islamism; and, finally, the attitude and style of conservatism. Again, Bora (2017a, p. 342) underlines that this stance adopted in conservatism is, in fact, an important dynamic for the Turkish right wing, nationalism, and Islamism, contributing to their convergence on common grounds.

The smooth articulation observed among these three ways of thinking represents a significant dynamic in the emergence of varying manifestations of women. Nationalist thinking considers the woman as the equivalent of the homeland; conservatism defines the woman as the heroic mother; and Islamist thinking establishes a state of motherhood that guarantees the future of the family and, what is more, incorporates the nationalist-conservative discourse.

In her works, Ayverdi praises the woman whom she intertwines with the past, while adopting a critical perspective towards women caught in the change brought along by modernisation. Despite her membership to such organisations as the Turkish Women's Cultural Association (Azak, 2021, p. 252), Ayverdi voices her discontent with the phrase "women's rights" (1976, pp. 300-302), arguing that women and men are different from each other in physiological and psychological terms and therefore, the two sexes cannot share equal rights, duties, and responsibilities. Nevertheless, this cannot constitute grounds for oppression or abuse towards women. Indicating that Islam offers a reasonable order that defines the rights and freedoms of women, Ayverdi asserts that there should not be any competition between women and men, who should adjust themselves within the confines of the possibilities granted to them by way of their creation. In this respect, Ayverdi draws a comparison with the West, where she posits women's rights are under legal protection, but the functioning of this mechanism takes root in a threat. Repeating the hadith "Paradise lies at the feet of the mother" (1976, p. 302), Ayverdi once again reminds the reader of the value attributed to women in Islam. At this point, conservative thinking refrains from internalising the equality and freedom defined as the universal principles of the natural rights argued for in the liberal theory (Birler, 2017, p. 325). Mentions of equality that find some reflection in Ayverdi's thinking represents an understanding that is inherent to conservative thinking, while freedom is not unrestricted in nature but is embodied in a right which individuals may enjoy in strict adherence to the law and the authority and in their unbreakable link with citizenship (Çağla, 2010, p. 197). When considered within the framework of the Islamist-conservative thinking, this discourse yet again leads to the conclusion that the duty of motherhood is a value that warrants protection and appeals to equality and freedom remain in the background in the cause of prioritising the society over the individual.

### **Conclusion**

The study endeavoured to offer an evaluation of the process of change surrounding conservatism in Turkey along with the start of the Republican era on the basis of the works and views of Samiha Ayverdi. Samiha Ayverdi is a thinker who imprinted this perspective on both in her life and her works to a significant extent and one of the thinkers who made their mark on their times, with her critique of not modernisation itself, but the forms this process took in the society. In Ayverdi's thinking, the ideal woman is as tradition-bound as she is socially strong, educationally well-nurtured, and carefully avoidant of any power-grabbing competition with the man. Stressing women's role as mothers in raising future generations, Ayverdi entrusts them with the role of carrying over national awareness, tradition, and culture to the new generation. In her denial of the fictionality of gender, Ayverdi advises that by "nature", women cannot be equal with men. Even though Ayverdi refrains from affording an equal position to women in relation to men, she does uphold the role of motherhood she imposes on women within the framework of Islamic values, which she emphasises is a quality that is exclusive to women.

Ayverdi, with her thinking overlapping with the tumultuous years of Turkish modernisation, is a figure who personally bore witness to the transivity of modernisation of the Turkey of the Republic along the axis of revolution and reforms. Her views on women and family fall not too far from the role in which women and family find themselves cast in today. Positioned as the single actor for nation-building by reason of her childbearing, the woman has come to assume the role of an engine for the

transfer of traditions, customs, and history to the next generation. Ayverdi advises against the negative implications of modernisation for the current and future generations and this advice bears traces from the conservative cynicism towards the future. When it comes to women, her classification between the “old” and “new” women may be considered as a result of her affinity towards conservative thinking over modernity. Ayverdi reacts to the ideas frequently appearing in gender studies today centred around the arguments that women and men are equal; women should be liberating from their subordination in the society; and every woman should be defined as a standalone individual with her intertwined version of women’s roles swinging on the pendulum of private and public space. Women are positioned in the private space as fulfil their role as mothers and complement their men by taking on childcare and domestic responsibilities, while they find themselves shifting to the public space when positioned as “heroes”.

As modernisation in Turkey was shaped through dualities, women and family experienced their own form of remodelling. The profound reason behind Ayverdi’s thinking being built around two-way comparisons between categories of women is her endeavour to put forward a concrete reaction against the process of modernisation. In fact, Ayverdi reacts against not modernisation itself, but the ways in which it unfolds in society. In her eyes, women and family are the values keep the Turkish social structure on its feet and so, must be protected. Protection of these values must be guided by the values of the past. The society builds on the unity of women and men, which cannot be sustained with equality between sexes. This harmonious unity is only possible if women and men fulfil the roles and duties assigned to them in the best way possible. The equality purported by modernism fails to secure a social structure based on stability and security. The organismic social structure did not draw any sharp lines around ideological conservatism, thereby allowing conservatism to articulate with a range of other ideologies also motivated by the characteristic atmosphere of the day.

The transformation conservatism has undergone to current day has undoubtedly highlighted a range of descriptions of the role and importance assigned to women and family in the society. At this point, an important commonality between conservatism of the past and conservatism of today lies in the unwavering importance they both attach to the idea of family centred around the woman being the building block of the society despite the variations observed in the exact set of roles and duties involved in this position. What essentially sets apart the conservatism of the past also lies in its attribution of the values for Turkey as a Republic to be built on to women and family.

## **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

### **Ethical Approval**

Ethical approval for this study is not applicable.

### **Author Contributions**

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Turkish uses the same word for conservation and protection. t.n.

<sup>ii</sup> “Matters of National Culture and our Cause in Education”