Women in Islam and the Middle East always have attracted the attention of Western scholars, politicians, and travelers. In fact, one can hardly find a travelogue by a Western traveler in the area in which there is no reference to women’s lives and manners. Though these accounts and studies by Orientalist scholars have provided a basis for judging women’s status in Muslim countries, they also have caused a great deal of controversy due to their hasty judgments, biases, shortcomings, and omissions. Ruth Roded wishes to avoid the biases of these writers and scholars by providing a more accurate picture of the laws and rules governing the lives of Muslim women in the Middle East. She has brought together a set of original Muslim texts and articles by Muslim scholars on women’s rights and concerns. Here, Muslims speak for themselves and interpret their own history, religious edicts, and life situations. The book is meant to serve as a reader for English-speaking readers interested in learning about the diverse perspectives on the status of women in Islam and the Middle East.

The book includes an excellent introduction by the editor and five parts, each containing several selections. The introduction is a comprehensive review of the issues pertaining to debates about Islam, sexuality, religious laws, interpretation of religious texts and traditions, and Westerners’ perception of Muslim women. Each selection is explained in the context of the larger literature on the issue and its relevance to the study of women in the Muslim world. These introductory remarks are extremely helpful in understanding the significance and relevance of each selection. Roded also raises many good questions about each selected text and the larger issues involved in the debate. Women are the main focus of varied topics of these parts: the foundation of Islam, early Islamic history, women and Islamic law, women’s roles in medieval society, and vicissitudes of Muslim women’s responses to feminist challenges.

The issues discussed are extensive in nature; the materials included are diverse in their perspectives and methodologies, and the time span covered is vast. Although these features make the book more appealing to a wider audience, they distract from its thematic and geographical focus. In the absence of a theoretical perspective relating these diverse classical and contemporary selections to each other, the reader is left to his/her own ideas about the connections between them. Without such a theoretical orientation, it is hard to know why certain pieces are included and others not, why some issues receive attention and others not, and why we read so much about Arab and Turkish women and so little about Iranian women. More importantly, despite the author’s desire to avoid the existing biases in the literature, the selection bears her taste and understanding of Islam. She talks about Islamic feminism, but her selection fails even to mention some of the latest and most important writings by Muslim writers like Motahhari, Saidzadeh, and Ahmed. Finally, if the book is about women in the Middle East, one wonders why voices of secular women, most of whom are believers in Islam but do not wish to use it as the sole principle for determining women’s status in society, are absent from it. Despite these shortcomings, this book serves as a good source in a field in which primary sources are rare.