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Cultural Symbiosis and Grassroots Tolerance between Muslims and Copts in Edwar al-Kharrat's *Turabuha Za'faran*

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Abstract

This article examines cultural symbiosis and grassroots tolerance between Muslim and Coptic communities in Edwar al-Kharrat's *Turabuha Za'faran* (1985). Using qualitative content analysis, twenty purposefully selected excerpts were coded inductively into six domains of interreligious practice, covering theological reciprocity in neighborly conversation, hybrid devotional language, festive and culinary exchange, shared childhood and schooling, friendship and workplace solidarity, and sacred geography with collective mourning. The analysis shows that the novel portrays tolerance not as an abstract ideal but as embodied, recursive practice woven into the domestic, culinary, educational, and occupational life of 1930s and 1940s Alexandria and the Delta village of Tarrana. It argues that al-Kharrat's autobiographical fantasia works as a literary archive of everyday peacebuilding that anticipates recent scholarship on lived coexistence, while its nostalgic mode is read critically against the power asymmetries, gendered divisions, and class conditions that structured Muslim-Coptic relations. The article proposes asymmetric reciprocity as a concept for relations in which material and social exchange are balanced while the symbolic and institutional terms of exchange remain unequal, and it argues that this gradient, rather than harmony or hierarchy alone, is the novel's most useful contribution to the study of coexistence.

INTRODUCTION

Relations between Egypt's Muslim majority and its Coptic minority are usually narrated through two competing scripts: one of harmony, in which the communities share one national fabric, and one of conflict, in which sectarian incidents and a precarious legal status define the Coptic condition. The historical record sustains both at once (Carter, 1986; Elsasser, 2014; Hasan, 2003; Moner, 2012), and recent scholarship has tried to move beyond the binary by attending to the everyday practices through which Muslims and Copts live together, negotiate difference, and repair relationships locally (Friesen, 2026; Hager, 2024; Mac Ginty, 2014). This article joins that effort from a literary direction, asking what a novel can add to the study of coexistence; its wager is that Edwar al-Kharrat's *Turabuha Za'faran* is not only a record of coexistence but a theory of how coexistence is made.

Edwar al-Kharrat was born in 1926 into a Coptic family in Tarrana, a village in the Nile Delta, and moved as a boy to Alexandria, the center of his imaginative world. A major figure of Arabic literary modernism (Somekh, 1991; Starkey, 2006), he is best known for *Rama and the Dragon* (al-Kharrat, 2002) and the Alexandria sequence that continued in *Girls of Alexandria* (al-Kharrat, 2005). First published in Arabic in 1985 (al-Kharrat, 1985) and translated as *City of Saffron* (al-Kharrat, 1989), the novel is an autobiographical fantasia whose preface disclaims autobiography while inviting it, in a genre where lived experience and imaginative reconstruction interpenetrate (Ostle & Wild, 1998; Reynolds, 2001; Starr, 2009). It reconstructs a Coptic childhood across two spaces: Tarrana, where the church anchors a dense communal world (Armanios, 2011; Swanson, 2010), and the cosmopolitan Alexandria of literary memory (Haag, 2004; Halim, 2013). The narrative does not argue for tolerance; it performs it, scene after scene, in kitchens, schoolrooms, workshops, streets, and cemeteries.

Existing scholarship has concentrated on al-Kharrat's poetics (Kittani, 2013), while the interreligious texture of his Alexandria books has received little sustained attention (Aljahdali, 2021): the most substantial account reads them as a poetics of memory rather than a record of communal practice (Starr, 2009), and the one study of the novel's Alexandria treats its urban poetics, not its interreligious life (Hui, 2024). Meanwhile, work on Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt shows how ordinary believers convert communal tension into engagement (Hager, 2024), and studies of everyday peacebuilding in provincial Egypt document how Copts and their neighbors sustain relationships under pressure (Friesen, 2026). What is still rare is a reading that treats the Arabic novel itself as an archive of such grassroots practice, organized as systematically as ethnographic evidence.

This article therefore poses three questions: what forms of cultural symbiosis and grassroots tolerance the novel represents; across which social

spaces they are distributed; and what this representation contributes to the study of everyday coexistence. Twenty purposefully selected excerpts were analyzed through qualitative content analysis. Cultural symbiosis is used in its literal biological sense of unlike organisms living together in sustained, mutually adapted association; grassroots tolerance names tolerance practiced by ordinary people in daily life, from below rather than through state policy (Bayat, 2010; Griera & Garcia Bossio, 2025; Holland, 2023). The argument is compact: the novel represents coexistence as a stratified achievement whose practices interlock yet sustain uneven reciprocity, material exchange close to balance, social regard balanced but doctrinally asymmetrical, knowledge flowing almost entirely from majority to minority. The article names this pattern asymmetric reciprocity and treats it as the novel's central sociological insight, and it shows that the tolerance the novel records is an achievement of face-to-face space that does not aggregate automatically into a national settlement.

METHOD

The study used a qualitative content analysis design, appropriate for research that seeks to interpret patterns of meaning in textual data while remaining accountable to explicit coding procedures (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Krippendorff, 2019), including inductive variants that move from raw text to category systems through systematic condensation (Mayring, 2022). The unit of analysis was the textual excerpt, defined as a passage in which the narrative stages an interaction, an utterance, an exchange, or a spatial arrangement involving both Muslim and Coptic presences or references. The primary data source was the Arabic text of *Turabuha Za'faran* (al-Kharrat, 1985), supplemented by its English translation, *City of Saffron*, for cross-checking (al-Kharrat, 1989). Through close reading, twenty excerpts were purposefully selected to represent the full range of interreligious scenes in the novel. Each excerpt was recorded in a corpus sheet together with an English translation and an analytic memo stating what the excerpt reveals about symbiosis or tolerance. The excerpts were numbered E1 to E20 and are cited by number throughout the results.

Coding proceeded inductively in three cycles (Saldaña, 2021). In the first cycle, open codes were assigned to each excerpt from its memo, such as mutual theological recognition, shared festive food, or workplace oath. In the second cycle, related codes were consolidated through constant comparison into axial categories. In the third cycle, these categories were grouped into the six thematic domains that structure the results below. Translation checks were performed against the English translation where available, and ambiguous renderings were resolved by consulting the Arabic context surrounding each excerpt. An audit trail of code assignments was kept so that the movement from raw excerpt to domain remains transparent and open to reanalysis. Credibility was pursued through prolonged engagement with the full novel before excerpt selection,

constant comparison across excerpts, and explicit linkage of every claim in the results to a numbered excerpt. The design nevertheless has limits. It analyzes a single novel by a single author, so the findings characterize the represented world of the text rather than Egyptian society as such. The excerpts are also translations, and some resonance of the Arabic, especially its Alexandrian dialect and Coptic liturgical cadences, is inevitably reduced. Finally, the novel's nostalgic and autobiographical mode shapes what it remembers, a point the discussion addresses rather than ignores.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The six domains that emerged from the analysis are summarized in Table 1, and two features of the table shape every claim that follows. The domains are not sealed: excerpt E16, the boatman's oath by al-Mursi Abu al-'Abbas while working for a Coptic employer, carries both a devotional utterance and a labor relation, and such overlap is treated as a diagnostic, since practices that cross domains are the ones that hold the system together. The distribution is also balanced, ten excerpts in food, childhood, schooling, and the women's visiting network, where women and children predominate, ten in the threshold, workplace, and public city, where men do, a symmetry that anticipates the argument that coexistence is reproduced in two registers, one domestic and female, one public and male.

Four terms organize the discussion: coexistence names living together without open violence; symbiosis names interdependence in which practices adapt to one another; tolerance is hierarchical in its classical form, a permit extended by a majority (Brown, 2006; Forst, 2013); conviviality names the affective texture of mixing (Gilroy, 2004; Nowicka & Vertovec, 2014). The novel depicts coexistence thickened into conviviality and sustained by symbiosis while tolerance remains a permission from above, and keeping the terms apart prevents treating a warm street as a just order. The discussion moves through vernacular theology, the infrastructures of coexistence, and solidarity in sacred space, before testing the novel's harmony against genre, memory, gender, class, and power.

Table 1. Thematic domains of cultural symbiosis and grassroots tolerance and their excerpt distribution

Domain	Excerpts	Core practice
Theological reciprocity in neighborly discourse	E1, E2, E18	Mutual recognition of each other's sacred figures in women's conversation
Hybrid devotional language and blessing	E3, E4, E16	Utterances that blend Christian and Islamic formulas in a single speech act

Domain	**Excerpts**	**Core practice**
Festive and culinary exchange	E5, E13, E19	Sharing of dishes across Ashura, Ramadan, Easter, Eid, and Christmas
Shared childhood, schooling, and institutional accommodation	E6, E7, E8, E20	Ramadan lantern rounds, Lenten and Ramadan meals, Quran memorization, parallel religion classes
Friendship and workplace solidarity	E9, E14, E15, E16	Eating, oath-making, and loyalty across religious lines at work
Sacred geography and collective mourning	E10, E11, E12, E17	Adjacent sacred spaces, open processions, simultaneous funeral prayers

Vernacular Theology and the Grammar of Asymmetric Recognition

The most intimate symbiosis in the novel is verbal. In a recurring scene of visiting, Sit Uheiba, the Muslim neighbor, tells the narrator's Coptic mother that their Prophet enjoined kindness toward the People of the Covenant and that Jesus is a messenger from God like Moses and Abraham, and the mother sometimes swears to her by Christ, the living Son of God (E1, E2, E18). The exchange is brief, formulaic, and repeated, local knowledge both women handle well. The register is vernacular religion, religion as lived and spoken by particular people rather than authorized by institutions: Primiano (1995) proposed the term, McGuire (2008) developed it into a full account of lived religion, and what a practice means cannot be separated from where, when, and between which tasks it is performed (Szwed, 2024). Neither woman is reciting doctrine: Sit Uheiba's sentence is a Quranic tradition filtered through neighborly idiom, the mother's oath is liturgical language used as a pledge of intimacy, and both are acts of translation, converting theologies into a currency that can be spent in a doorway.

The recognition is doctrinally non-reciprocal, and the novel does not pretend otherwise: Sit Uheiba's kindness rests on a Quranic architecture that already contains Jesus, while the mother's oath commands no slot that would receive Muhammad; what is reciprocal is regard, not theology. Recent ethnography confirms that such asymmetric recognition is neither rare nor brittle: situational peace in majoritarian settings forms by playing on the instability of the majority's own categories rather than by disavowing difference (Maqsood, 2025), and such non-liberal encounters disclose modes of engagement that liberal tolerance frameworks sideline (Fesenmyer et al., 2025). Forst's typology names the layers (Forst, 2013): permission doctrinally, coexistence thickened by respect in

conduct, something close to esteem in affect, and the distance between the levels is what asymmetric reciprocity names.

> "She would tell her at times that their Prophet had commended us to them, and that Jesus, our prophet, is also a messenger from God, like Moses and Abraham. And my mother would sometimes swear to her by Christ, the Son of the living God." (E18)

A second register fuses the traditions in one breath: the father opens the door to the Muslim girl Hosniya with the sign of the cross and, in the same utterance, *la hawla wa la quwwata illa billah* (E3), sending her off praying that God guide her (E4). Bakhtin's hybrid construction, two voices in one utterance without either surrendering its accent, describes the mechanism (Bakhtin, 1981), and Goffman's threshold explains its location, the doorway where a household manages the transition between family and street (Goffman, 1959). The blessing works by layering, underwriting one act of shelter with whatever authority the moment can summon; its elasticity flourishes at domestic thresholds, never renegotiates doctrine or institutional authority, and never travels upward. The skeptical objection, that this is much theory on a few polite sentences, is answered by repetition across years, calibration to the recipient, and transmission to the child, whose durable dispositions are formed in early practice (Bourdieu, 1977): the novel is a record of habitus assembled in a mixed street.

> "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, enter, my daughter, enter. There is no power and no strength save in God." (E3)

The Infrastructures of Coexistence in Food, Festival, and Schooling

The richest evidence is culinary. The Muslim neighbors send dishes of Ashura and jugs of *khushaf* in Ramadan, the households exchange plates of *ghriba* and *qaraqish* at Easter, Eid al-Adha, Christmas, and Eid al-Fitr (E5), and the mother kneads the *firi al-malak*, the angel bread stamped with Coptic inscriptions, before dawn for the feast (E13, E19). The exchanged plate rewards a materialist reading: it carries the obligation to return it, binding two calendars into one cycle of indebtedness (Mauss, 1990), and it produces reciprocity without mixture, Ashura remaining Ashura and the Easter cookie remaining an Easter cookie, while gastro-politics shows that food is never politically innocent (Appadurai, 1981).

The plates are affection and negotiation at once, over whose calendar organizes the street, and that the negotiation ends in a draw is the novel's most concrete image of a plural order; contemporary reporting shows the same circuit persisting amid contestation over official recognition of Christian holidays (Christians in Egypt Push to Have Easter Recognized as an Official Public Holiday, 2025). But the infrastructure has carriers: nearly all of it is women's unpaid domestic labor, invisible in the accounts of the institutions it sustains (Hochschild, 1989), assembled in the interstices of household time and space (Szwed, 2024), and the mother's baking is not only housework but a laywoman's

liturgical act, agency exercised through rather than against the norms that confine these women (Mahmood, 2005): they are the infrastructure of coexistence and its unofficial priesthood at once.

> "Her Muslim neighbors would send her dishes of Ashura in its season, and jugs of khushaf in Ramadan, and we exchanged plates of cookies, biscuits, ghriba, and qaraqish with milk at Easter, Eid al-Adha, Christmas, and Eid al-Fitr." (E5)

The circulation is learned early and learned together: Coptic and Muslim children carry lanterns on Ramadan nights and divide the evening's haul equally (E6); the school cafeteria serves Lenten food before the Christian feasts and hands all children sandwiches in Ramadan so Muslim classmates may break their fast with them (E7); the narrator memorizes *surat al-Layl* and *surat al-Duha* to his Muslim teacher's praise (E8); and for religion lessons the Muslim children gather with Khalifa Effendi while the Coptic boy listens from the window (E20).

> "We would go round with him, Coptic and Muslim children alike, through the houses on Ramadan nights, all of us carrying Ramadan lanterns, taking sweets and nuts from the doors, singing ahallu ahallu, Ramadan is generous, and we divided what we had gathered equally among everyone." (E6)

The school displays institutional accommodation and its limits. Religion classes divide by faith while building, meals, and the Arabic curriculum hold everyone together, yet integration flows one way: where the curriculum is single, the minority learns the majority's idiom and the majority learns nothing of the minority's (Starrett, 1998), and the boy at the window of the Quran lesson is positioned at the window of the institution that forms the nation. These scenes test intergroup contact theory: contact reduces prejudice under equal status, common goals, cooperation, and institutional support (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), the meta-analytic evidence is strong for prejudice reduction and weaker for structural change (Paluck et al., 2019), and contact remains consistently associated with lower prejudice across group properties (Lim et al., 2024).

The school satisfies two conditions and violates the first, since the curriculum assigns unequal status to the two confessions, while play and work satisfy all four, which is why the lantern rounds and shared meals succeed where the classroom does not; interreligious contact improves relations where the majority's own script licenses goodwill toward the minority (Köbrich et al., 2024), and the Quranic commendation Sit Uheiba speaks is such a script in miniature. Contact changes attitudes when status is bracketed and fails where status is institutionalized; since everyday engagement, unlike associational engagement (Varshney, 2002), cannot resist mobilization from outside the street, while interreligious peace at the national scale turns on demography, state regulation, and elite incentives (Hoffmann et al., 2024), the novel's coexistence is durable in calm times and vulnerable in crisis.

Solidarity, Friendship, and the Sacred Geography of Grief

Tolerance in the novel also has a class address. The narrator eats bread, salt, fried potatoes, and Turkish cheese with his Muslim workmates, jokes in Alexandrian dialect, trades ritual insults, and petitions for rewards on their behalf (E9); his oldest friend Jaber greets every good fortune with *kull ni'ma min 'and Rabbina* and brings him the *Apollo* magazine (E14); the narrator knows the rhythms of Jaber's seven-day expiatory fast (E15); and Rais Nono's oath by al-Mursi Abu al-'Abbas accompanies his labor for a Coptic employer (E16). Bread and salt is a bond of obligation, dialect fluency makes the Coptic clerk an insider, and the ritual insults belong to a register that recent research on everyday peace treats as a practice marking trust across communal lines precisely because it can misfire (Güven & Özerdem, 2026); yet the integrative agent is named by the boatmen themselves, *ghalaba*, shared poverty, and class solidarity rather than the language of tolerance holds the communities together (Holland, 2023).

The point cuts both ways: solidarity conditional on shared poverty has a breaking point, and the novel shows no scene in which competition over scarce resources tests the bond, precisely the occasion historians identify for rupture once communal conflict became politically organized (Carter, 1986; Elsasser, 2014; Hasan, 2003). Friendship works differently: Jaber's loyalty is biographical and particular, closest to conviviality, the unforced ease of interaction that requires neither common creed nor common cause (Gilroy, 2004; Nowicka & Vertovec, 2014), and the novel is exact that a single friendship is not a social order.

The city grounds these bonds in space. The narrator's routes pass between the church of Saint Catherine and the Greek church in little Manshiyya (E12); the Palm Sunday procession returns through the mixed streets in the open (E11); funeral prayers for the dead and the missing are held at the very same hour in the mosque of Sidi al-Mursi Abu al-'Abbas and in the church of Saint Mark (E10); and Tarrana, almost without Muslims, keeps its church in its own half (E17). The spatial evidence tests the theory of antagonistic tolerance, which reads shared sacred sites as stable only while the balance of power goes uncontested (Hassner, 2009; Hayden, 2002; Hayden et al., 2016): the novel's Alexandria does not fit, because its mosque and cathedral are adjacent without being shared, choreographing proximity rather than sharing (Bowman, 2012), a configuration of synchronized parallel devotion.

Its supreme image of unity deserves a harder look: the two congregations do not pray together but simultaneously, in their own buildings, for the same dead, and the one moment of fully synchronized liturgy is produced by war. Mourning is the single calendar both communities share without translation, the ritual through which a collectivity repairs the rupture that death introduces (Durkheim, 1995), but its solidarity is transient, a function of shared vulnerability rather than shared belief. The evidence thus supports a fourfold

reading of interreligious space, coexistence, competition, avoidance, and synchronized parallel devotion, in which the novel's Alexandria demonstrates its dependence on colonial cosmopolitanism, a wartime economy, and a particular labor market (Haag, 2004; Halim, 2013; Hanley, 2017); recent scholarship finds that nostalgia for the mixed Alexandria arrives in writing already accused, inseparable from the exclusions that structured the life it mourns (Khalil, 2026), and al-Kharrat's accusation is quieter: it remembers who carried the coexistence, and who merely benefited from it.

> "The prayers for the dead and the missing were held in the mosque of Sidi al-Mursi Abu al-'Abbas and in the church of Saint Mark at one and the same time." (E10)

Tarrana supplies the model's missing term. There the Coptic boy is a local majority, the church the center of a world rather than a minority building, and his earliest experience of social space is being at home in numbers; the confidence with which he later moves through mixed Alexandria is not the confidence of a minority that has learned to accommodate but of a child who has first known majority status in a small place. The novel's geography stages two regimes of numbers, and the village is not the absence of coexistence but its unexamined baseline.

The Limits of the Archive in Nostalgia, Power, and Counter-Memory

Table 2. The gradient of reciprocity across the six domains

Domain	**Unit of exchange**	**Form of reciprocity**	**Excerpts**
Festive and culinary exchange	Dishes, jugs, and their return	Near balanced, since obligation runs both ways	E5, E13, E19
Neighborly blessing and oath	Regard and recognition	Balanced in regard, asymmetric in doctrine	E1, E2, E3, E4, E18
Shared childhood and play	Sweets, lanterns, and games	Balanced among children, supervised by adults	E6
Schooling and curriculum	Scripture and religious knowledge	Asymmetric, flowing from majority to minority	E7, E8, E20
Workplace and friendship	Labor, bread and salt, loyalty	Balanced within a shared class position	E9, E14, E15, E16
Sacred space and mourning	Simultaneous prayer	Parallel rather than shared, synchronized by crisis	E10, E11, E12; contrast E17

The first conclusion the results support is that *Turabuha Za'faran* represents tolerance as practice rather than principle: none of the twenty

excerpts argues for coexistence, all enact it. This accords with the turn toward the everyday, in which coexistence is sustained through recurring, largely unremarkable interactions rather than declared in charters (Griera & Garcia Bossio, 2025; Mac Ginty, 2014), and with the recognition that ordinary people carry much of the burden of social change in the Middle East (Bayat, 2010). The findings also justify cultural symbiosis in a strict sense, since the domains form an interdependent system: theological reciprocity makes the hybrid blessings available, synchronized calendars rest on the visiting networks, shared childhood reproduces the dispositions that workplace solidarity requires, and sacred geography houses them all; symbiosis in biology implies nothing about equality between partners, and neither does the novel's.

What the domains add up to is a graded reciprocity: closest to balance in the exchange of food, balanced in regard but not doctrine in the exchange of blessings, unbalanced in knowledge, where the minority learns the majority's scripture and the majority learns nothing of the minority's, and absent at the level of institutional authority. The gradient runs from the plate to the classroom to the law. This is asymmetric reciprocity, specified rather than gestural: a definition, that material and social exchange can be balanced while the symbolic and institutional terms remain unequal; dimensions, so that a relation can be scored separately on exchange and recognition; and a testable implication, that domains rank differently on the two, as the novel's do, since the kitchen is nearly just while the school is not. Table 2 arranges the domains along this gradient.

Before generalizing, the genre demands scrutiny: autobiographical fantasia is not testimony, and its pact with the reader licenses invention and idealization (Ostle & Wild, 1998; Reynolds, 2001); the Arabic edition's opening note disclaims autobiography in explicit terms (al-Kharrat, 1985, author's note). Boym's distinction clarifies what kind of memory the book practices (Boym, 2001): restorative nostalgia reconstructs the lost home, reflective nostalgia dwells in the longing itself and refuses the consoling reconstruction, and *Turabuha Za'faran* belongs to the second type, announcing its artifice and fragmenting its chronology.

Current memory research sharpens the stakes: nostalgia is less a distortion than an evaluative resource from which the present is measured (Hakoköngäs, 2025), and memory studies increasingly privileges the fugitive memories of minorities that no national narrative preserves (Wegner, 2024); Starr reads al-Kharrat's poetics as constructing memory as a formal problem rather than a documentary record (Starr, 2009). Two considerations temper skepticism: the novel's density of detail is of a kind memory invents rarely and experience supplies readily, and its truth claim is structural, an account of how the mixed city felt from the position of a Coptic child, within the Alexandrian archive of cosmopolitan memory (Halim, 2013).

The silences belong to the evidence as much as the scenes do: no sectarian friction, no Muslim child learning Coptic texts, no woman negotiating in public, and the silences of a record are produced by the same conditions that produce its statements (Stoler, 2009). The historiography of Egypt makes this concrete, since sectarian friction has been mediated by press politics, state maneuver, and elite competition, as in the crisis following the assassination of Boutros Ghali (Fallas, 2024); the novel's silence is period-specific, documenting what a Coptic childhood could afford not to see. The sharpest test is the critique of tolerance as a discourse of power that reproduces hierarchy in the very act of permitting difference (Brown, 2006), and it has teeth here: the mother swears by Christ before a neighbor with expanding dominance, the child memorizes the majority's scripture, the school divides religion classes on the majority's terms, as historians of the Coptic question have documented from the liberal era onward (Carter, 1986; Elsasser, 2014; Hasan, 2003; Moner, 2012), and critical Coptic studies warns that writing about Copts is itself tempted to cast them as passive objects (Lukasik & Akladios, 2025).

The present reading incorporates the objection by keeping Coptic agency at the center: the family wields real symbolic capital within relationships it does not control, the practices are interstitial and persist beneath the level at which dominance is negotiated (Friesen, 2026; Mac Ginty, 2014), and contemporary evidence confirms the pattern's double face as sharing continues while contested policy persists (Tadros, 2013; U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2025). The finding is not that Alexandria was harmonious but that harmony and hierarchy coexisted in the same streets, which is why the novel is more valuable than a polemic: it tells us what people actually did, and what their doing cost.

A rival reading deserves a hearing: that the novel is a counter-memory composed in the 1980s, close to Pope Shenouda III's return from confinement, an episode in the Patriarch-President pact that Tadros (2013) reconstructs, so that the harmonious childhood judges the present. It does not defeat the argument: the practices are corroborated by historiography and ethnography of Egypt (Friesen, 2026; Hager, 2024; Schielke, 2012); a counter-memory is still evidence, and literary studies confirm that remembered cosmopolitan ordinariness was a shared inheritance drawn on when the present fell short (Khalil, 2026). What the rival reading defeats is the national-allegory reading: everyday peace does not aggregate automatically into a political settlement (Mac Ginty, 2014), ordinary life is the medium through which violence is endured and made livable (Das, 2007), and at the national scale the variables that matter are different in kind, demography, state regulation, and elite incentives (Hoffmann et al., 2024), administered through church construction, public holidays, personal status law, and the security apparatus (Elsasser, 2014; Mahmood, 2016; Tadros, 2013).

The novel can tell us how a street worked; it cannot tell us how a state might be reformed. For method, coded literary evidence can travel: organized as domains and numbered excerpts (Krippendorff, 2019; Saldaña, 2021), a novel becomes answerable as ethnography is. For education, the children dividing sweets (E6), memorizing each other's scriptures (E8), and eating each other's festival foods (E5, E7) show pedagogies renewable because ordinary, but contact reduces prejudice only where the majority carries norms licensing goodwill toward the minority (Köbrich et al., 2024), and the curriculum's failure lies not in teaching the majority's religion but in teaching it in a form that excludes the minority. For the present, in an Egypt where recognition of Christian holidays remains contested (Christians in Egypt Push to Have Easter Recognized as an Official Public Holiday, 2025) and sectarian violence persists (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2025), the literary archive offers neither blueprint nor consolation, but a remembered proof that another everyday was possible, together with an inventory of what it cost and who paid.

CONCLUSION

This article analyzed twenty excerpts from al-Kharrat's *Turabuha Za'faran* as coded evidence of symbiosis and grassroots tolerance between Muslims and Copts. Six domains emerged, spanning theological reciprocity, hybrid devotional speech, festive food exchange, shared childhood and schooling, workplace solidarity, and sacred geography with collective mourning. Together they portray tolerance as an embodied, distributed, and teachable practice, sustained by women's networks, children's games, workers' meals, and a city of adjacent mosques and churches. The analysis makes three contributions. Conceptually, asymmetric reciprocity names relations in which material and social exchange are balanced while the symbolic and institutional terms remain unequal, a gradable concept that improves on harmony or hierarchy and captures the novel's gradient from the exchanged plate to the classroom to the law. Methodologically, a literary text can be coded as an archive of practice without substituting for fieldwork, provided the coding is auditable and silences are recorded as findings. Substantively, the practices sustaining coexistence were carried disproportiona-tely by women, children, and the poor, which explains both their resilience and their invisibility.

Read critically, the symbiosis was doctrinally asymmetric, reproduced through women's unpaid labor and the majority's curricular terms, conditional on shared poverty and proximity, and synchronized most completely by war, so that harmony and hierarchy coexisted in the same streets. The study's limits, a single novel read in translation and autobiographical in form, mark directions for further research: comparative readings across al-Kharrat's Alexandria cycle, novels of the same city by Muslim writers, and reception and translation history. What the analysis establishes is the Arabic novel's value as an archive of everyday peacebuilding, one that keeps alive a practical memory of how ordinary

people once made coexistence ordinary, and that insists its conditions of proximity, labor, and loss can be rebuilt, because they were built before.

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