

Colombian writer and son of emigrants Luis Fayad delivers talk at NDU

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Reported by Elie Nabhan

In the framework of the Beirut World Book Capital, “Foire de Littérature Ibéro-Americaine” running at St. Joseph’s University in Beirut from the 4th to 6th of March, and under the auspices of H.E. Rida Mariette Kuri Salame, the Ambassador of Colombia, and Fr. Walid Moussa, President of Notre Dame University, in cooperation with the Lebanese Emigration Research Center, Mr. Luis Fayad, a Colombian writer, a descendant with Lebanese origins, was invited to deliver a lecture at NDU.



A view of the audience at the auditorium (Mar 2010).

Among those present in the audience to hear the lecture, *Writers of Lebanese Origins: Their Role and Functions in Latin America* included H.E. Rida Mariette Kuri Salame, the Ambassador of Colombia; Ambassador Fouad Turk; Fr. Walid Moussa, President of NDU; author Luis Fayad and his wife; Mr. Suheil Matar, Director General Public Relations and Information at NDU; Dr. George Abdelnour, NDU’s resident Fulbright Fellow, who acted as translator; LERC Latin American Liaison Officer Mr. Roberto Khatlab; Colombian Embassy staff, students from NDU, Friends of LERC and LERC staff.

The first to speak at the podium was Ms. Nada Saad, Assistant Director of Public Relations Office at NDU, who explained that the Lebanese people had been emigrating in great numbers for centuries, staying true to a Phoenician tradition, escaping poverty and oppression to pursue their dreams in other lands. Ambitious Lebanese emigrants went on to excel in the fields of business, politics, sports and culture in their new host countries, achievements that made Lebanon proud of its diaspora.



H.E. the Ambassador of Colombia, Mrs. Kuri Salame at the podium (Mar 2010).

H. E. Mrs. Salame then touched upon the meaning and importance of Lebanese emigration to Colombia, stating migration as the theme of “Foire de Littérature Ibéro-Américaine” in coordination with Latin American governments and the country of Spain, starting at NDU.

NDU was chosen she said “to initiate the arrival of the sons and daughters of migrants to come and study at NDU.” The accord to be signed with NDU will pave the way for a flow of Colombian students to study in Lebanon and even to graduate from here.

Luis Fayad, she mentioned, is a descendant of Lebanese grandparents who were early emigrants to Colombia. Constantly recalling their roots, never separated from Lebanon in thought while carrying on their traditions of hospitality and generosity, encouraged the writer to explore the theme of migration.

The Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at NDU, Dr. Carol Kfour, confirmed Mr. Fayad as a writer of the highest order, a scholar in literature and art history, a journalist and translator, who has graced many universities, including Berlin.

Out of his many books and novellas that explored the theme of migration, *Ester’s Parents* is his only work that deals specifically with Lebanese emigration, an urban novel written by a descendant of a Lebanese who regards himself as a Colombian writer.



Writer Mr. Luis Fayad delivering his talk (Mar 2010).

In his talk, the author confirmed his identity saying, “I am a Colombian writer, not a Colombian Lebanese writer. Only when I write in Arabic will I consider myself as a Lebanese writer.”

This strong affiliation with the Colombian identity is the result of living through three generations in a country that welcomed the Lebanese with open arms, a country that encouraged them to immerse themselves in the Colombian way of life and to participate in Colombian society. They were made to feel part of the continent.

Referring back to his grandparents, who spoke with an accent, like foreigners not like those born and bred in the country, he said they were still treated as Colombians. Speaking to a Lebanese, he said, was like speaking to a Colombian.

The difference between the Lebanese who emigrated to Latin America as compared to those who emigrated to Europe was the level of integration. The emigrants in Europe were not immediately accepted as were those in Latin America.

Concerning the topic of the influence of writers of Lebanese origin in Latin America, the works of Latin American poets and writers coming from a Lebanese background such as Meira del Mar, manifested themselves on the theme of migration. Writers of Lebanese origins, also express themselves the sense of emigration.

Mr. Fayad stated his delight at being in Lebanon and thought it an honor to participate as a writer with NDU and the Beirut World Book Capital, especially as a writer on the

theme of migration. As a child he had learnt his trade in theatres, radio and television, always keen when dealing with scripts.

His literary works, he said, belong to the Spanish language and especially the idioms spoken in Bogota, Colombia, with its particular pronunciations, intonations and syntax.

Tracing back Colombian history to the 16th Century, he declared there was an indigenous culture that was transformed by the arrival of Spain. Latin American literature at the time was just literature related by the Spanish in other territories such as in the diaries of their explorers.

The arrival of Lebanese culture created another tradition of literature in Colombia, a place where different ethnic groups, were they Arabs, Yugoslavs, Italians or British, were continuously flourishing.

The influence of the Arabs in Latin America had come across the seas with the Spanish over 500 years ago with Arab culture, literature, paintings and architecture.

While researching his book, *The Face of the Cardinal*, the author learnt a little bit of the Arabic language and noticed similarities with Spanish. Arabic, he said, was the language of poetry influencing even Spanish. His research led him to discover documents and certificates, materials and artifacts that allowed him to clarify emigration while being exact.

As a writer, “one may invent many things but one must never lie,” he said.

The characters in his novels and short stories are descendants of all ethnic groups, descendants of these new foreigners, with the 19th-20th century Lebanese immigrants referred to as “Turkos”.

Many of them, like his father, were almost mystical in their devotion to Lebanon. Coming back for the author, walking through the city streets and town squares, living out memories as descendants of those who once migrated, visiting the places where his grand parents and parents had once lived is an experience, he said, that is shared by many Latin American writers.

“As a Colombian writer of Lebanese descent, like all those of us who are of Lebanese descent, I think of Lebanon fondly, from what our parents lived through or talked about and from the picture of Beirut.”

To end the event, an exchange of awards then took place, with Father Moussa presenting an award to the writer, Mr. Fayad, and Mr. Souheil Matar presenting an award to H.E. Mrs. Kuri Salame, the Ambassador of Colombia.



Fr. Walid Moussa presenting an award to Mr. Luis Fayad (Mar 2010).



Mr. Suheil Matar honors H.E. Mrs. Kuri Salame (Mar 2010).



(From left to right): Mr. R. Khatlab, Fr. W. Moussa, Mr. L. Fayad, Mr. S. Matar, H.E. Mrs. Kuri Salame, Ms. B. Abdel Khalek, Mrs. L. Haddad, Mr. E. Nabhan and Mr. E. Sfeir (Mar 2010).