

# THE TENSIONS OF BELONGING

## EXILE, POLITICAL OBLIGATION AND LOYALTY BETWEEN JUDITH SHKLAR AND HISHAM MATAR

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This article examines the tension between political obligation and personal loyalty in the context of exile, drawing on the theories of Judith Shklar and utilizing Hisham Matar's literary work, *My Friends* (2023), as a primary analytical framework. Through an interdisciplinary investigation that interweaves political philosophy, history, and literature, the work examines how exile compels individuals to confront complex moral dilemmas, thereby questioning their relationships with the state, the community, and themselves. The examples presented in the essay provide a contemporary, narrative perspective on the fragmented identity of exile.

The essay highlights how Shklar's thought, centred on the relationship between rationality and affectivity, offers crucial tools for interpreting the ethical and political challenges that characterize the experience of exile. At the same time, Matar's work enriches this analysis, highlighting the personal and psychological implications of these dynamics. In conclusion, the article proposes that exile not only represents a condition of loss but also an opportunity to question the meaning of identity, loyalty and belonging in a globalized and fragmented world.

Keywords: Political Obligation, Loyalty, Exile, Conflict

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### 1. Introduction

Judith Nisse Shklar, a prominent political theorist and philosopher, was born in 1928 in Riga, Latvia – a city increasingly suffocated by escalating anti-Semitism and a fraught political climate characterised by the tensions between Latvia and Russia. Her early life was irrevocably altered by the tragic and mysterious death of her elder sister, Miriam, which catalysed her family's emigration to the United States.<sup>2</sup> This experience of exile not only marked a significant turning point in Shklar's personal biography but also played a crucial role in shaping her intellectual trajectory, particularly in her probing engagement with the concept of cruelty and her nuanced reflections on citizenship, both of which became central themes in her scholarly work.

The intersection of Shklar's theoretical frameworks and her lived experiences is particularly pronounced in the later phases of her thought, which, tragically, remained unfinished at her untimely death in 1992. In this culminating segment of her oeuvre, Shklar thoroughly examines the complexities surrounding political obligation and personal loyalty, delving into the inherent tensions and dilemmas that arise when these two imperatives come into conflict. Within this analytical framework, exile emerges as a particularly salient context where the conflict between political responsibilities and personal allegiances is starkly illuminated.

This analysis aims to explore the manifestations of this dichotomy as experienced by individuals in exile, examining how such circumstances compel a re-evaluation of one's

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<sup>2</sup> Precise information regarding Shklar's life is contained within the interview J. B. Walzer, *Oral History of the Tenured Women in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University*, 1981, in *Harvard Dataverse*, (<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CR02PG/VHWGVM>).

obligations to the state versus those to family, community, and oneself. To enrich this exploration, Shklar's theoretical insights will be interwoven with references to the recent work of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Hisham Matar, particularly his poignant narrative, *My Friends* (2023). Matar's literary contributions exemplify the enduring internal conflicts exiles face, providing a contemporary lens through which we can better understand the ongoing relevance of Shklar's ideas. Through this analysis, we aim not only to elucidate the philosophical implications of Shklar's thought but also to illuminate the lived experiences of exiles today, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the intricacies of political and personal identity in the contemporary world.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Political obligation and loyalty

First, it is essential to clarify the terminology pertinent to the concepts under examination. In the framework established by Shklar, the term "obligation" encompasses behaviours that are regulated by rules to which individuals are compelled to conform. In contrast, the adjective "political" refers explicitly to «laws and law-like demands imposed by public agencies»<sup>4</sup>. Thus, political obligations can be interpreted as the societal norms that every citizen, as a member of the political community, is obligated to follow. Notably, these regulations exhibit a rational character, indicating that individuals choose to accept or reject them based on a reasoned evaluation of their implications for themselves and others. This viewpoint posits that individuals intentionally adhere to these obligations due to an awareness of a universal moral law, which can be recognised through rational contemplation. Such contemplation requires an impartial and objective consideration of the principles of duty and justice.

At the opposing end of the spectrum of political obligation lies the concept of loyalty, which is characterised not by rationality but by deep affective ties. Loyalty is primarily understood as an «attachment to a social group»<sup>5</sup> shaped by individuals' cultural and

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<sup>3</sup> Another work that we will not deal with directly here, but that highlights this conflict, is *I Saw Ramallah* (1997) by the Palestinian writer and poet Mourid Barghouti. This autobiographical work tells the story of Barghouti's return to Palestine after thirty years during which he had been forbidden to return to his mother country because of the Six-Day War of 1967. In this work, the internal conflict of someone who has never felt at home, who no longer has a precise sense of belonging and feels precarious in space, time, and identity, clearly emerges. In the 2000 edition of the work, a preface by Edward Said was also added.

<sup>4</sup> J. N. Shklar, "Obligation, Loyalty, Exile", in S. Hoffman (ed. by), *Political Thought Political Thinkers*, Chicago (IL), The University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 38-55: 40.

<sup>5</sup> *Ivi*, p. 41.

educational experiences throughout their formative years. The decision to associate with a particular group is often not made actively; such affiliations are frequently determined by factors such as one's birth and upbringing.

Furthermore, loyalty extends beyond mere group affiliation and encompasses two additional dimensions: fidelity and allegiance. Fidelity can be seen as a more personal expression of loyalty, given that it pertains to individual commitments. Individuals may choose to be faithful to specific persons, such as friends or partners; this aspect of fidelity is inherently a matter of personal choice. In contrast, loyalty is often a more communal phenomenon, wherein affiliations are typically formed without intentional selection. In conclusion, allegiance encompasses a commitment grounded in an oath, which inherently enforces personal and social loyalty. Shklar illustrates this concept through the disintegration of Charlemagne's empire, arguing that the only means to restore political cohesion and navigate the ensuing state of anarchy was to forge personal bonds among the soldiers. This dynamic is encapsulated in her assertion that «the inferior becomes “the man” of his superior, his vassal in due course»<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that loyalty and fidelity will likely conflict with the established political order.

The concepts discussed are interconnected through a common theme: the inherent invitation to conflict. As Shklar argues, throughout history, there has been a persistent tension between personal fidelity and group loyalty on one hand, and political obligations on the other. This discord reflects a broader dichotomy wherein the emotional dimensions of the individual frequently stand in opposition to their rational considerations.<sup>7</sup> Sophocles' famous tragedy, *Antigone*, illustrates this conflict very well: Antigone is caught between the conflict of King Creon's order not to bury the body of her brother Polynices and her fidelity and love for the latter. Affection for her family, as is well known, is what will win the conflict, becoming the real motive for Antigone's actions.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Why exile?

Following the clarification of the relevant concepts and the provision of a concise example, it is imperative to undertake the fundamental inquiry: why does exile exemplify the

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<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> *Cfr. ivi, passim.*

<sup>8</sup> See: J. N. Shklar, “LECTURE 2: Antigone”, in S. Ashenden, A. Hess (ed. by), *On Political Obligation*, New Haven (CT), Yale University Press, 2019, pp. 25-37.

conflict between rationality and emotion, as well as between political obligation, group loyalty, and personal loyalty? First, it is crucial to delineate the category of individuals that Shklar characterises as exiles: «an exile is someone who involuntarily leaves the country of which he or she is a citizen»<sup>9</sup> due to a mandate issued by political forces, but also due to extreme poverty or precarious conditions within their country – these, too, constitute forms of coercive expulsion. Additionally, Shklar identifies a distinct subclass of exiles known as internals, individuals who experience exile within the very state of which they are citizens. An illustrative case of this phenomenon includes those confined in concentration camps.

Exiles, distinct from common criminals fleeing justice, are individuals who generally perceive themselves as having been subjected to unjust treatment by the state that has expelled them. This premise prompts Shklar to explore the political responsibilities and duties that accompany their status:

If you were forced into exile by an unjust decision of a legitimate government, would you still feel bound to behave in a such way as to do the best for those of your countrymen who had been your friendly fellow citizens, or would you just work for a foreign power no matter what that mean for your former citizens?<sup>10</sup>

Exiles frequently face critical decisions regarding whom to obey, the manner of that obedience, the entities to which they should pledge their loyalty, and the extent to which their personal fidelity might compromise their political judgments.

The philosopher initiates the discussion with a well-known historical example from ancient Greece:<sup>11</sup> Themistocles. This Athenian general faced ostracism due to perceptions of his excessive power, which raised concerns about his potential threat to the democratic framework. A conviction for treason soon followed his initial banishment from the borders of Athens. Ostracism served not merely as a punitive measure but as a strategic public policy aimed at safeguarding the integrity of democracy from potential harm. Following his expulsion from Athens, Themistocles allied with the Persians, ultimately becoming an

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<sup>9</sup> J. N. Shklar, “Obligation, Loyalty, Exile”, cit., p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> J. N. Shklar, “LECTURE 23: The Bonds of Exile”, in S. Ashenden, A. Hess (ed. by), *On Political Obligation*, New Haven (CT), Yale University Press, 2019, pp. 204-212: 204.

<sup>11</sup> Shklar also discusses Aristide’s case. See J. N. Shklar, “Obligation, Loyalty, Exile”, cit., pp. 46-47.

advisor to their king. Crucially, throughout this period, he posed no threat to the internal stability of either Persia or Athens, skilfully navigating his dual allegiances: «of him it could be said that he scrupulously met his political obligations and had no loyalty at all»<sup>12</sup>. In the case of Themistocles, ostracised and serving the Persian king, the dilemma between loyalty and political obligation is, therefore, rendered moot. Upon his exile, he exhibited neither loyalty to Athens nor a commitment to its political responsibilities. While he could indeed be labelled a traitor, Thucydides expresses nothing but admiration for Themistocles, noting his intelligence, prudence, and adaptability, «he describes him as intelligent, prudent, and adaptable, a perfect survivor»<sup>13</sup>.

In a temporal context that follows that of Themistocles, Shklar elucidates the historical narrative surrounding Captain Dreyfus, thereby emphasising the intricate interplay between loyalty and obligation as it pertains to exile. Alfred Dreyfus, a French military officer of Jewish heritage, was wrongfully accused in 1894 of espionage, specifically of divulging classified French military documents to German authorities. The prosecution relied on fabricated evidence, and despite his absolute innocence, Dreyfus became a victim of pervasive anti-Semitism within a society that was all too willing to accept him as a scapegoat. He was formally convicted in 1895 and subsequently exiled to Devil's Island in French Guiana. It was not until 1906 that his conviction was annulled, and in 1914, Dreyfus re-entered the French military, where he served with commendable distinction and honour.

The case presented serves as a compelling illustration of the precedence of obligation over justice. Despite being unjustly compelled to relocate from the borders of his state, he consistently identified as «a super-patriotic, loyal French citizen»<sup>14</sup>. Shklar emphasises the intriguing nature of this situation, noting that Dreyfus had the opportunity to mount a political campaign against the actions of the French military, yet chose not to do so. His unwavering loyalty and obedience remained directed towards the nation that had wrongfully exiled him. «He, at any rate, felt that his obligations remained binding upon him»<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ivi*, p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> J. N. Shklar, "LECTURE 23: The Bonds of Exile", cit., p. 210.

<sup>15</sup> *Ivi*, p. 211.

One noteworthy case analysed by Shklar pertains to the predicament faced by Japanese Americans who were interned in prison camps<sup>16</sup> following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. In 1943, this group of exiles was compelled to swear allegiance to the United States, which required them to repudiate any loyalty to Japan. Shklar emphasises that «among those who refused to swear, there was a deep and justifiable sense of betrayal». Their country had indeed betrayed them by categorising them as enemy aliens and subjecting them to internment. However, this analysis emphasises those who pledged loyalty to the United States and would have fought on behalf of their country thereafter. Many parents voiced their sorrow regarding the demands placed upon their children and were even more disheartened by their children's choices. This situation illustrates an exile's profound conflict when reconciling political obligations with personal loyalty: «each one of these people had to make a personal choice involving family and one's own future»<sup>17</sup>. Unfortunately, for numerous individuals, this tension between obligation and loyalty culminated in a painful renunciation of their obligations, resulting in a perceived betrayal of their familial values.

What is unequivocally evident from the narratives of the individuals involved is that the inherent conflict between obligations and loyalties profoundly shapes the experience of exile. Each exile is compelled to engage in introspective contemplation regarding whom to obey and whether the sense of allegiance to a community persists or diminishes once one has traversed beyond geographic boundaries and is distanced from emotional connections. The cases of Themistocles, Dreyfus, and Japanese Americans exemplify these intricate dynamics, which defy the establishment of definitive prescriptive guidelines for appropriate behaviour in such contexts. The only answer is that, in the role of an exile, «you would be testing personal loyalty against obligation, active and lapsed»<sup>18</sup>.

The dilemmas faced by historical figures such as Dreyfus and Themistocles anticipate the moral ambiguity embodied by Khaled in *My Friends*, whose status as an exile is marked not by an apparent betrayal or allegiance, but by hesitation, internal conflict, and disorientation.

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<sup>16</sup> This is an example of internal exile within the country's borders.

<sup>17</sup> Ivi, p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> J. N. Shklar, "LECTURE 23: The Bonds of Exile", cit., p. 211.

#### 4. Between London and Libya

And, from then on, «Fuck exile» became a refrain, our private platitude, added as if a blessing: «Enjoy your meal and fuck exile», «Good night and fuck exile», «Safe travels and fuck exile».<sup>19</sup>

Having delineated the theoretical framework established by Judith Shklar, we now shift our focus to the literary sphere, exploring how the dilemmas she articulates are both echoed and reinterpreted in contemporary narratives of exile. Building on these discussions, we now focus on the significant contributions of contemporary writer Hisham Matar,<sup>20</sup> particularly his latest work, *My Friends*. This text offers a rich tapestry of narratives that resonate with the complex ideas presented by the political theorist Judith Shklar.<sup>21</sup>

Shklar's theories on the interplay between personal relationships, ethical considerations, and the broader sociopolitical landscape provide a compelling lens through which to analyse Matar's work. As we delve into the nuances of *My Friends*, it becomes evident that Matar engages with themes of friendship and loyalty and interrogates the moral responsibilities that arise in times of political strife. By situating Matar's narratives within the framework of Shklar's thought, we can uncover a deeper understanding of how individual experiences and ethical dilemmas reflect and shape societal values.

This connection between Matar and Shklar presents an opportunity to explore the implications of personal bonds in the face of systemic injustice and how literature can foster critical reflection on ethical obligations within a community. Through this analysis, we aim to elucidate how Matar's writing not only mirrors Shklar's theories but also extends and challenges them, ultimately enriching the discourse surrounding the relationship between literature and ethical-political engagement. Additionally, as illustrated in her

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<sup>19</sup> H. Matar, *My Friends*, New York (NY), Random House, 2024, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> At approximately three years of age, Hisham Matar returned to reside with his family in Tripoli, where they remained until 1979. The political persecutions enacted by Gaddafi's regime compelled the Matar family to leave their homeland. They initially sought refuge in Cairo, where both Matar and his brother continued their education. In 1986, Matar relocated to London. Thus, Matar's life has encompassed the profound experience of exile.

<sup>21</sup> Another work by Matar that touches on this theme is *The Return: Father, Son and the Land in Between* (2016). In this work, Matar recounts his memories centred on his return to Libya in March 2012 in search of the truth behind the disappearance of his father Jaballa Matar, an opponent of the Gaddafi regime. These memories represent a personal reflection on loss, memory and the tensions between family loyalty, obligation to the truth and reconciliation with the state.

renowned work *Ordinary Vices*,<sup>22</sup> she had a penchant for drawing examples from the literary world, a method we will also adopt here.

The book's narrative is presented through the perspective of Khaled Abd al Hady, a Libyan immigrant who departed from Benghazi in 1983 and has resided in London for over thirty years. The story primarily concerns Khaled's friendship with fellow Libyan immigrants, Mustafa al Touny and Kha. A central theme of the narrative is the experience of exile; it becomes evident that Khaled's departure from Libya was not merely for academic pursuits in Edinburgh, but rather a result of his involvement in the 1984 demonstration,<sup>23</sup> which marked the beginning of his transition into exile. Subsequently, Khaled was granted political asylum in Great Britain, further emphasising the complexities of his journey.

I will never have the words to explain what it is like to be shot, to lose the ability to return home or to give up on everything I expected my life to be, or why it felt as though I had died that day in St. James's Square and, through some grotesque accident, been reborn into the hapless shoes of an eighteen-year-old castaway, stranded in a foreign city where he knew no one and could be little use to himself, that all he could just about manage was to march through each day, from beginning to end, and then do it again.<sup>24</sup>

Matar's book presents a compelling exploration of the complex emotional landscape experienced by exiles,<sup>25</sup> specifically through the character of Khaled. His narrative not only provides an insightful examination of personal feelings associated with exile but also resonates with the nuanced themes that Shklar aimed to address. Despite the opportunity to return to Libya, where his friends Mustafa and Kha valiantly enlist in the fight against Gaddafi, an oppressive force in the lives of the Libyan people, Khaled makes the conscious decision to remain in London. This choice illustrates his internal struggle between

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<sup>22</sup> In *Ordinary Vices*, the intertextuality of literary and theatrical characters is consistently present, illustrating their integral role within the themes addressed in *Vizi Comuni*. In the concluding section of his work, Shklar candidly discusses how he has embraced the narrative approach espoused by Montaigne, recognizing this method as a means of engaging with political issues in a manner that is more tangible and resonant with the lived experiences and concerns of individuals. This choice, however, comes at the cost of adhering to theoretical strictness and precise terminology. See J. N. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, Cambridge (MA), Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985.

<sup>23</sup> Demonstration against Gaddafi that took place in London in April 1984. It is remembered above all for the death of a policewoman who was on duty in front of the Libyan embassy.

<sup>24</sup> H. Matar, *My Friends*, cit., p. 161

<sup>25</sup> In particular, Matar leverages the conflicting feelings of abandonment and feeling abandoned.

his dual identities as both Libyan and English. Matar's employment of interior monologue and temporal disjunction serves to deepen Khaled's experience of fragmented selfhood. The recurrence of motifs such as silence, stagnation, and the body in transit underscores the psychological toll associated with suspended loyalty.

From a perspective of loyalty, Khaled's loyalty to his homeland appears to diminish, as evidenced by his reluctance to accompany his friends back to Libya despite their earnest appeals. His decision to stay in London signals a disengagement from his origins and highlights the complexities of personal loyalty within the broader discourse of national affiliation. Ultimately, Khaled's refusal to heed the entreaties of his closest friends underscores the tension between established identity and cultural obligations. The following passage serves as a significant representation of Mustafa's disillusionment regarding Khaled's decision-making:

«I don't understand you. You just carry on as though nothing has happened». I waited for the panic to subside. «Your country needs you», he then said and said it sympathetically, with neither doubt nor irony. «What will happen will happen, with me or without me». «It's narcissism», he said, his tone hardening, «to hide one's intentions behind theories of the inevitable».<sup>26</sup>

Khaled serves as a quintessential representation of the exilic experience. In contrast to more dichotomous figures such as Themistocles or Dreyfus,<sup>27</sup> Khaled embodies a more nuanced perspective. While it has been posited that he has relinquished his allegiance to the Libyan populace, the narrative makes it evident, at multiple junctures, that a segment of him harbours a desire to reconvene with his origins. In this context, one can observe a particularly illustrative excerpt from chapter 28:

I took a shower and by the time I was done I had decided to return to Benghazi. I will deny everything, I will tell them I was naive, I will apologise, swear allegiance if I have to. And let the others think what they will. After all, what does it matter what people think? All that matters is one's sanity. Besides, nothing is changed by slogans. The truest opinions are never

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<sup>26</sup> H. Matar, *My Friends*, cit., p. 323.

<sup>27</sup> Themistocles exhibits unequivocal certainty regarding his decision to maintain a connection to Athens. In contrast, Dreyfus is steadfastly committed to upholding his loyalty and obligations to France.

uttered. Most people live their entire lives with what they truly believe buried deep in their chests.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, Khaled exists as an internally conflicted exile: as previously noted, his identity and sense of belonging as a Londoner ultimately supersede his ties to any prior affiliations.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the narratives of the various characters examined highlight a fundamental theme inherent in the experience of exile: the intricate and often fraught interplay between the notions of obligation and loyalty. Each individual who undergoes exile is compelled to engage in a profound introspection regarding the entities to which they owe allegiance, whether those be societal, cultural, or familial. This introspection raises critical questions about the endurance of group loyalty in the absence of proximity to one's homeland and the emotional ties that may have once anchored them. The cases of Themistocles, Dreyfus, Khaled, and the Japanese Americans illustrate the complexities of these dynamics, each representing unique circumstances that defy the establishment of definitive behavioural guidelines for exiles. Rather, the experience of exile presents a nuanced landscape where individuals must navigate their personal sense of loyalty against the weight of their obligations, both present and those that have diminished over time. Exile, in both Shklar's theorisation and Matar's narrative, becomes a space of ethical experimentation, where traditional political binaries collapse. Rather than concluding with general remarks on displacement, this article suggests that exile is an epistemic condition that reveals where «you would be testing personal loyalty against obligation, active and lapsed»<sup>29</sup>.

Judith Shklar's thought, with its attention to the unresolved tensions between obligation and loyalty, offers a valuable lens for interpreting not only the historical experiences of exile but also the challenges that modern exiles face in an increasingly globalised world. At the same time, Hisham Matar's novel reminds us that these dynamics do not only take place on a theoretical or political level, but manifest themselves in the daily

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<sup>28</sup> *Ivi*, p. 114.

<sup>29</sup> J. N. Shklar, "LECTURE 23: The Bonds of Exile", cit., p. 211.

lives, affections and the most intimate choices of those who cross geographical and identity borders.

In light of these considerations, exile is not only a condition of loss, but also a fertile ground for questioning the concepts of belonging and responsibility, offering new perspectives on what it means to be a citizen, an individual, and a member of a community in an ever-changing world that is more fragmented and interconnected.

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