



ISSN Print: 2664-8717  
ISSN Online: 2664-8725  
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00  
IJRE 2024; 6(1): 221-223  
[www.englishjournal.net](http://www.englishjournal.net)  
Received: 02-04-2024  
Accepted: 04-05-2024

**Dr. Nilanko Mallik**  
Associate Professor,  
Department of English and  
General Studies, University of  
the People, Pasadena, USA

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. Nilanko Mallik**  
Associate Prof, Department of  
English and General Studies,  
University of the People,  
Pasadena, USA

## Othello and imposter syndrome

**Dr. Nilanko Mallik**

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i1d.191>

### Abstract

Othello, the hero of Shakespeare's tragedy of the same name, is a general serving in Venice. By race, he is from Africa, and was sold as a slave. Although a general who commands soldiers who are mostly whites, he suffers from imposter syndrome, which is a psychological phenomenon where individuals doubt their achievements and fear being exposed as an imposter. The article examines how this forms the chief drive for Othello, despite his apparent confidence, and shapes the course of the play towards tragedy.

**Keywords:** Othello, William Shakespeare, imposter syndrome, tragedy, Iago

### Introduction

Othello, a black General in the European city of Venice, where the population is mostly whites, is undoubtedly a play that resonates in themes of race and prejudice. Written and performed in Jacobean England, the play continues to be performed even at present. The plot revolves around Othello marrying Desdemona, the "fair" daughter of senator Brabantio, in secret. Privy to this is Cassio, an amorous soldier whose guidance helped Othello into flirting successfully with Desdemona by spinning exaggerated tales of his heroic deeds to charm the young lady. As a reward for helping him, Othello makes Cassio the Lieutenant, a rank which the latter does not deserve, if one considers his merit and experience. Iago, a senior soldier who expected to be the Lieutenant, is filled with jealousy. He also comes to know of the marriage and decides to wreck it. He informs Brabantio, who becomes infuriated and arrests Othello. Although the Duke releases him and asks him to go to Cyprus to fight off invading Turks, he departs with ill-wishes from his father-in-law. Iago now schemes to make Cassio fall out of favour with Othello, at which he is successful. He then tells Cassio to speak to Desdemona to plead for him and uses Desdemona's pleading to fill Othello's mind with suspicion of infidelity. He plants Othello's first gift to Desdemona - a handkerchief - where Cassio picks it up. Othello, upon knowing that the handkerchief is with Cassio, is filled with rage, and orders Iago to get Cassio killed, and decides to kill Desdemona himself. In the end, when Iago's plot is revealed, he takes his own life for killing Desdemona.

Traditional interpretations of the text place Othello's rage as his hamartia, or even his pride. Some consider jealousy to be his hamartia. This paper examines how Othello suffers from Imposter Syndrome (IS) and that becomes the leading cause of his hamartia, culminating in tragedy.

### Understanding Imposter Syndrome

Imposter Syndrome (IS), a.k.a. Imposter Phenomenon (IP) was termed by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978 as a study among successful women in marginalized groups <sup>[1]</sup>. It refers to a persistent feeling of inadequacy despite evident success. The National Library of Medicine defines IS as "a behavioral health phenomenon described as self-doubt of intellect, skills, or accomplishments among high-achieving individuals" <sup>[2]</sup>. Those experiencing this syndrome are often not able to attribute their achievements to their merit, but rather, upon luck, and also fear being treated as impostors <sup>[3]</sup>. Thomas and Bigatti note that there is a link between IS and mental health disorder, as those who suffer from IS often exhibit other symptoms like anxiety, self-doubt and depression <sup>[4]</sup>. Imposter syndrome is prevalent among high achievers who, despite external validation, believe they do not deserve their success.

IS can be categorized into two groups - over-preparation group and procrastination group <sup>[2]</sup>. In the former, an individual with IS feels the need to prepare thoroughly (much more than others), else be seen as a fraud; in the latter, the individual delays preparation out of fear that being seen to prepare for the task will act as confirmation that one is an imposter. Both these categories comprise the first stage of IS cycle. After completion of the task, if one gets success, it is filled with fear of being as an imposter, so one is not able to accept one's merit in success, but one feels the failure even more acutely <sup>[1,2]</sup>.

### Placing Othello to suffer from IS

Othello's background as an outsider in Venetian society plays a crucial role in his susceptibility to IS. As a Moor, Othello is constantly aware of his racial and cultural differences. In his story-telling sessions to Desdemona, he tells how he was sold as a slave (Act I, Scene III). Although he escaped and his rise to the rank of a General speaks volumes about his merit, he suffers and is made to suffer from IS. In Act I, Scene III, he tells before the Duke and others,

"...Rude am I in my speech,  
And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace;" (ll. 96-97)  
<sup>[5]</sup>.

The line reveals how much Othello undervalues his success of winning the heart of Desdemona with this story, and how he undermines his present speech even in the act of delivering it, although it pleases all those present (except Brabantio, of course) and the Duke himself is swayed by his eloquence. Later, in Act III, Scene III, he regards himself as inferior before Desdemona.

"...Haply, for I am black  
And have not those soft parts of conversation  
That chamberers have..." (ll. 267-269).

These lines bring out his belief that his racial and cultural differences make him less deserving of Desdemona's love.

In marrying Desdemona, the fair daughter of senator Brabantio, Othello reveals his insecurities, as he attempts to keep the marriage a secret. He allows himself to be arrested and be led for trial. He is not angry at the accusations of Brabantio; in his words, there is only submissive humility, which hints at his feelings of "otherness", of an imposter. Brabantio insults him as an imposter by saying, "To fall in love with what she feared to look on!" (Act I, Scene III, l. 116). Iago utters something similar in Act III, Scene III, telling Othello directly, "And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks, / She loved them most" (l: 238). He continues making Othello feel like an outsider by remarking that Desdemona chose someone alien to her clime and complexion.

"...As, to be bold with you,  
Not to affect many proposed matches  
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
Whereto we see in all things nature tends- (ll. 268-271).

A few more lines later, he adds,  
"Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,  
May fall to match you with her country forms  
And happily repent" (ll. 276-278).

Despite Othello's military achievements and the respect he commands by virtue of his post, he is, in such instances, often reminded of his "otherness", which fuel his IS. Iago's success ultimately lies not in the crafty plan (for that is foiled) but at being able to make Othello feel that he is an

imposter, which happens only because Iago strikes the chord closest to his fears about himself, surrounded by whites in European soil. Iago is able to successfully trigger his fear about himself being unworthy of the love of Desdemona.

It may be argued that Othello's constant need to prove his worth, both to himself and to others, underscores his internal struggle with his merit. It has been pointed out earlier that one of the symptoms of IS is anxiety <sup>[4]</sup>. Anxiety manifests in various forms, and loss of temper is a characteristic feature of anxiety <sup>[6]</sup>. This is Othello's predominant nature - to lose temper at the drop of a hat. Not only does he lose temper, he also declares his restless and frustrated mind:

"Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!  
Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars  
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!" (Act III, Scene III.  
ll. 350-352)

The soliloquy reflects his disturbed mind, brought about by his fears that his wife is cheating because of his inferiority. He decides to discard his achievements in battle, chooses not to remind himself of what he has earned, but bids them farewell to take up the confirmation of his inferiority, that of being an imposter.

It has been discussed above that over-preparedness is one of the groups of those who suffer from IS <sup>[2]</sup>. We see this trait in Othello, coupled with irritability. In Act II, Scene III, Othello braces up for holiday festivity in the least festive manner possible. He wants to be seen as the upholder of discipline. It may be argued that that is the exhibit trait of soldiers, but then, one must also see that all the other soldiers are enjoying in revelry. Othello's over-preparedness, even after knowing that the enemy ships have been destroyed in a tempest, is a manifestation of is deep-seated IS - he does not wish to be seen as an effectual leader (a black imposter) if the enemy attacks and they are caught off guard, even though the chances of that happening are slim.

Subsequently, when Cassio is drunk and a brawl breaks out, Othello comes running, presuming there has been an attack and his fears have been proved to be true. On seeing the soldiers gathered, he is unable to understand what has happened, and he asks Cassio to give a report. When Cassio is too drunk to speak, Othello's anxiety, now coupled with irritability, results in a loss of temper, and he punishes Cassio by taking away the rank of Lieutenant from him.

Once more, it may be argued that others would have done this too, had they been a General. It is not expected of a Lieutenant to be drunk and injure others in a fight. Rightly so. However, Othello's actions are driven by his fears again - if he does not punish, he will be seen as an unworthy leader, a fraud - so he punishes only to make himself be seen in the highest standards. This desire for perfection is also a feature of IS cycle <sup>[3, 4]</sup>. Huerker *et al.* Remarks that "this category is a continuum of hyper-competitive and perfectionist behaviors that occurs when practically unattainable standards and goals are self-imposed by those with IS" <sup>[2]</sup>.

On a more gruesome and gothic level, Othello's need for perfection is seen even as he attempts to kill his wife. In his infamous soliloquy, he resolves,

"Yet I'll not shed her blood,  
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth as monumental alabaster" (ll. 3-5) <sup>[5]</sup>.

He wants her body to remain perfect, even in death, without the blemish of a drop of blood ruining her beauty. Although

he is able to kill her, it is not as he had hoped. She wakes up and starts protesting; Othello loses his temper again and smothers her. When Emilia comes in and Desdemona utters her last words to her, absolving her husband of her murder, Othello's IS is perhaps at his highest, for he says, "You (heard) her say herself, it was not I" (l. 156). Yet, it is this IS - the need for perfection, that makes him reveal himself as the murder only in the next few lines.

"She's like a liar gone to burning hell!

'Twas I that killed her" (ll. 159-160).

This confession seems to have a parallel in the mad narrator's confession in Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*, where the protagonist murders, and reveals his own murder before others (though the reasons are different)<sup>[7]</sup>. Othello reveals not because he feels the surrounding people are mocking him, being aware of his deed, but because he cannot but impulsively be the perfectionist again, even to the degree that it convicts him of being the "blacker devil" (l. 161) that he has so far sought to hide and overcome.

In the end, when all is revealed, Othello is filled with remorse, once more displaying conditions of IS. His fear of failure and being labelled as an imposter has been realised; he has proved himself unworthy of the love of his faithful wife by wrongly suspecting her and killing her; he has destroyed a perfectly happy marriage by falling prey to his fears; he has neglected to see himself as the meritorious hero that he once was, as the commander that he still is. His self-pity swallows him and he takes his own life in grief.

Othello, in his final soliloquy, requests that in the state records, he not be remembered for his services anymore.

"I have done the state some service, and they know't.

No more of that" (ll. 399-400).

He renders his mighty services to trifles, and requests that he be remembered as one who

"...being wrought,

Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,

Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away

Richer than all his tribe;" (ll. 405-408)

He comes to regard himself as a Jew instead of a Christian, and generalizes himself as a man of tribe, while elevating Desdemona as a Pearl. In the very last lines of his soliloquy, he makes himself one with the Turk whom he once smote. The implication is quite clear - in his eyes, he is an infidel, a Turk, an imposter in Venice, and decides to kill himself for killing a Venetian.

## Conclusion

The paper has successfully analyzed the actions of Othello to place him as a character who suffers from IS. His hamartia - his error of judgement - is this, that he assesses himself as an imposter. Iago plays him by his deep-seated fears, and he responds to it, resulting in tragedy. Even in death, he displays the perfectionism that is characteristic in IS, as he kisses Desdemona and dies in a kiss.

## Acknowledgments

I acknowledge that the work is my own and is not funded by any institution or body. I have no known conflict of interest in publishing this work.

## References

1. Bravata DM, Watts SA, Keefer AL, Madhusudhan DK, Taylor KT, Clark DM, *et al.* Prevalence, Predictors, and Treatment of Impostor Syndrome: A Systematic

Review. *J Gen Intern Med.* 2019 Dec 17;35(4):1252-1275. Available from:

<https://DOI.org/10.1007/s11606-019-05364-1>

2. Huecker MR, Shreffler J, McKeny PT, Davis D. Imposter phenomenon. *StatPearls - NCBI Bookshelf.* 2023 [Cited 2024 Jun 18]. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK585058/#:~:text=Introduction,accomplishments%20among%20high%20achieving%20individuals.>
3. Clance PR, Imes SA. The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychother Theory Res Pract.* 1978 Jan 1;15(3):241-7. Available from: <https://DOI.org/10.1037/h0086006>
4. Thomas M, Bigatti S. Perfectionism, impostor phenomenon, and mental health in medicine: a literature review. *Int. J. Med. Educ.* 2020 Sep 28;11:201-213. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.5116/ijme.5f54.c8f8>
5. Othello, Folger Shakespeare Library. Folger. 2024 [Cited 2024 Jun 18]. Available from: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/othello>
6. Thompson JS, Schmidt NB. The role of anxiety sensitivity in anger symptomatology: Results from a randomized controlled trial. *J Anxiety Disord.* 2021 Oct 1;33:102462. Available from: <https://DOI.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2021.102462>
7. Poe EA. *The Tell-Tale Heart and other writings.* 1843 [cited 2024 Jun 18]. Available from: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Tell-Tale\\_Heart](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tell-Tale_Heart)