CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

It has been the aim of the present study to look on the four major tragedies of Shakespeare, viz., Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, and Macbeth as a coherent unit of expression by means of a close study of the ending of these tragedies. For not only does the Aristotelian definition of tragedy itself underline the importance of the ending but our experience of the tragic genre also bears testimony to the fact of its significance inasmuch as it is in the ending of the tragedies that both the meaning of the tragic action and its conclusion are signified. In other words, apart from the fact that the ending serves to contribute in a major way to rounding off the action, bringing to a height implicit contradictions and tensions, it also lays bare the significance of the story in such a way as to underline its tragic import. As in our opinion, no extensive study has been taken up by any Shakespeare scholar so far on this aspect of his tragedies we have attempted an analytical study of the ending of his four major tragedies with a view to discovering not only a distinctive pattern of Shakespearean tragedy but also the significance of events which may be identified as tragic. We have accordingly attempted to see the ending of these plays from the points of view of structure, vision and character.

As the concept of the tragic ending is dependent on a certain concept of tragedy itself, we have in the introductory chapter of the thesis made a brief and rapid survey of some of the leading theories of tragedy so as to discover the patterns and polarities of
opinion with regard to the concept of tragedy. All these readings help to throw some light on our understanding of the tragic sense of life, notwithstanding the fact that the views expressed are conflicting and divergent. But the chapter argues that while all these readings are profound statements on the tragic genre there is no serious attempt in any of these readings at studying the plays under discussion from the point of the ending. Even the Neo-classical critics' views on Aristotle's concept of katharsis seem to be limited to only one aspect of pity and terror which while forming an important part of the tragic ending leaves out much about the full implications of the ending. The purpose of the survey, therefore, has been to use the views of earlier critics as stepping stones to our investigation into the ending of the tragedies of Shakespeare.

It is the argument of the second chapter called "The Structure of Shakespearean Tragedy and the Denouement", that even when Shakespeare seems to lean on contemporary dramatic conventions for the construction of its tragic plots, the way in which the structure of his plays come to form a constituent and significant part of the thematic development of the plays rather than being a merely technical feature easily establishes his greatness as a tragic playwright and sets him apart from his contemporaries. It is true, the chapter argues, that the arrangement and procession of the episodic units determine the technical character of the Shakespearean tragedy like the other tragedies of the period, but the context in which these units flourish in the Shakespearean plot is provided by the thematic concerns themselves. And, therefore, as Ruth Nevo suggests:

... the structure of Shakespearean tragedy as it gradually and unceasingly emerges and develops is itself an instrument of imaginative inquiry, creative
and exploratory, whereby the dramatist orders and comprehends his perceptions;¹
But it is in the denouement of the plays, as the chapter goes on to show, that the perceptions and the epiphanic contexts are best realized. And thus even when the tragedies in the main do not yield any rigid structural pattern, the denouement succeeds in uniting the plays into a coherent structural pattern. The pattern is revealed not only through the way in which the loose threads as well as the disparate elements are woven together but also in the way in which the life and career of the hero come to an end. The kind of reversals thus seen at the close of each play argue an intermingling of surprise and a sense of inevitability as informing the thematic structure of the play. Thus while the tragedies explore the different aspects of human identity, the denouement brings to light the limits of such human identity itself. And, as the careers of both the hero and the villain come to an end after the travails and reverses of fortune the wheel comes full circle and evil is seen as facing its own nemesis. Finally, the pity and terror at the fall of the heroes notwithstanding, the feeling persists that a restitution of social, political, and natural order does occur at the end of the tragedies.

In the third chapter called “The Idea of the Tragic Hero and the Ending of Shakespearean Tragedies”, we have tried to show how the hero at the end of a Shakespearean Tragedy despite the constraints of circumstances confronted by him in the middle scenes comes to find a definition of himself thereby inducing in us not only a sense of admiration for him but a feeling of closeness as well. It is of course true that in

¹ Ruth Nevo, Tragic Form in Shakespeare, p. 30.
conformity of the Aristotelian notion of the tragic hero, Shakespeare's tragic heroes too, in spite of their weaknesses stand at a higher level than the members of the audience as against the hero of the comedy who is consistently below the level of the audience in terms of his humanity or the modern anti-hero whose character undermines the efforts of the audience to identify with him. But the greatness and dignity of Shakespeare's tragic heroes depend initially on their public role and image which have nothing inward about them. It is only this that elevates them above the level of ordinary humanity. As the action unfolds the human conflicts and weaknesses come to light and his sufferings too are seen to be intimately linked with such greatness which makes, as it were, an empathic identification of the audience possible with the hero. Eventually, however, out of his trials and sufferings there emerges a truly human greatness which has a universal quality. Our identification with him thus is a precondition for our appreciation of an insight into the spiritual dimensions of the tragic conflict. And as the hero finally asserts his sense of person breaking himself free from the clutches of those external forces that serve to bring about his disastrous end, there is in a sense an admirable return to the hero's original form of behaviour, but with a world of difference for he needs no external props now to assert his greatness. Finally, when the hero passes away, our sense of identification with him enables us to see him as a sacrificial victim redistributing his vital energy and the very human qualities of dignity and grace among his fellow survivors.

The fourth and the last chapter of the thesis called "The Tragic Vision and the Ending of Shakespeare's Tragedies" argues that the different tragedies discussed here invoke different worlds thereby giving us the apparent impression that there is no
coherence of vision among them. But a close look at the plays enables us to discover continuities of pattern and concern. Of course, there is no abstract statement as such, only concrete continuities, such as, for instance, the multifarious conflict between public compulsions and private response. As we come to the end of the plays, we realize that it is through the private response to the circumstances confronting the individual incumbent that the truth of life is realized. Even whatever truth is to be found in the public sphere can be discovered through the travail of the self, like Hamlet discovering the truth and necessity of the mission of revenge as a mission of restoring public order. The chapter also argues that the tragedies of Shakespeare involve situations which seem to bring us face to face with a world devoid of all meaning and purpose. But the ending of the plays asserts emphatically that the meaninglessness experienced is superficial and that it is only the discovery of meaning at a profounder level. The meaning however is finally revealed through the efforts of the survivors at the end of the plays to restore the human bonds by placing the hero and his downfall in the instructive context of history. There is of course no metaphysical guarantee of the validity of such values, only an inalienably human context.

It must be said however that it has not been our intention to formulate a systematic theory of Shakespearean tragedy, but rather to investigate one of the very important aspects of the tragic experience as revealed by Shakespeare. All that we can hope, therefore, is that our study of the ending of the four major tragedies of Shakespeare will contribute to our understanding of the plays in their totality.