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A close-up photograph of a hand holding an open, thick, old book. The pages are yellowed and the binding is worn. The background is dark, and there are many small, white dust particles floating in the air around the book, creating a dramatic, ethereal effect. The lighting is focused on the book, highlighting its texture and the hand holding it.

**Revisiting Shakespeare
400 Years After**

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Understanding Then Prevailing Economic Condition of Shakespearean England and Europe

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Abstract: During Shakespeare's life time, especially during his adult life (roughly 1580 – 1620), England in particular and Europe in general was undergoing economic, social, political and religious transitions simultaneously.

Within these transitions, economic changes were more important because England was still a rural economy and it was ruled by Queen Elizabeth. There was existence of feudal property rights and tenancy agreements. Traditional Capitalism was getting momentum with intensive rural trade integration, land ownership consolidation and rapid urbanization. The 'path to wealth' had created many ill effects and Shakespeare had also got firsthand experience of the risks involved while navigating the path to wealth. These transitions had both new opportunities and new forms of disaster. The above mentioned changes especially economic changes are narrated and evaluated by Shakespeare in great details in his works.

Present research work is an attempt to reveal and evaluate then prevailing economic condition in Europe in general and in England in particular as narrated by Shakespeare in his selected works.

Key words: Shakespeare, England, Economic Condition

1. Introduction:

During William Shakespeare's time (1564-1616), Europe especially, England was experiencing innumerable changes due to The Renaissance (1485-1660). Due to this the European society was undergoing economic, social, political and religious transitions simultaneously. Such transitions are depicted by him in his works which can be broadly divided into: The Early Period (1592-1601), The Tragic Period (1600-1610), and the Later Period (1610-1616). Within these transitions, economic changes were more important because England was still a rural economy and it was ruled by Queen Elizabeth. There was existence of feudal property rights and tenancy agreements. Traditional Capitalism was getting momentum with intensive rural trade integration, land ownership consolidation and rapid urbanization. The 'path to wealth' had created many ill effects and Shakespeare had also got firsthand experience of the risks involved while navigating the path to wealth. These transitions had both new opportunities and new forms of disaster. The above mentioned changes especially economic changes are narrated and evaluated by Shakespeare in great details in his works.

2. Objectives of the Study:

Present study is attempted with an objective to reveal and evaluate then prevailing economic condition in Europe in general and in England in particular as reflected by Shakespeare in his literary works.

3. Methodology:

Keeping in mind above objective, the secondary sources of data is being used to get an idea of prevailing economic condition in Europe in general and in England in particular which includes Shakespeare's own works like drama, poetries etc., and works of others which is the interpretations of Shakespeare's work in the form of books, scholarly articles, book reviews, evaluation, critical analysis etc.

4. Reflection England's Economic Condition:

Given below are some of the points of economic interest which depict the Shakespeare's narration of economic condition in Europe in general and in England in particular in his rich literary works.

A. British Economy:

During William Shakespeare's time England was much different than that of today. The majority of the people lived in poverty, earnings were just enough to survive. Most of the people in England lived in rural areas and were engaged in agriculture and related activities. Bad harvests, inflation, lack of jobs and a rise in population etc. were some of the major causes for the poverty. However, there was a small percentage of the population, which included big land owners, wealthy peasants and prosperous townsmen, who were able to make some money and become prosperous. The majority of the people who farmed rented land to farm on from big land owners. Other people who lived

in rural areas included craftsmen.

Some of the narratives worth of mentioning here are:

- Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is the play about a celebration of life in the countryside and the inhabitants of Duke Frederick's court who are exiled forest are narrated to be *experiencing liberty but at the expense of some easily borne discomfort* however with *contentment to be found in country life*, compared with the perfumed, mannered life at court.
- Similarly Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* narrates love and marriage, jealousy and revenge, social class and wealth. The play is centred on the class prejudices of middle-class England. The lower class is represented by characters such as Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol, and the upper class is represented by Sir John Falstaff and Master Fenton. Shakespeare uses both Latin and misused English to represent the attitudes and differences of the people of this era.
- Further, the phrases like "asks the clown, a peasant"- (*Othello*), "turn him out to wander the countryside" - (*King Lear*) also represent the traditional British Economy.

B. Capitalism, economic oppression and transformation:

It was in this period that there was still an existence of traditional capitalism not only in Europe but also in England. However, the society was also experiencing economic oppression and class struggle was prevailing. Evils of capitalists brought them defame by term "capitalist bloodsuckers". However, there were transitions in pure capitalism and hence, there is also a reference of those 'proto-socialist' who are not falling in the 'evil capitalist' category. To mention a few, in his *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is narrated as an evil capitalist, Antonio as proto-socialist and Portia as oppressed but liberated character. Further in the same play, a mercantilist and his trading adventures are described in detail. There is also a description of city of Venice which had reluctantly adopted the free-market egalitarianism and anti-racist policies that are characteristic of capitalism along with free-market ethos of Venice. Another character Gratiano, represents network of free favors and gift exchange that has always been the enemy of the free market i.e. Capitalism. The play also focuses upon the

important change in European economic ethics, in which interest (or by its nastier name, usury) was gradually becoming acceptable. In the play, Shakespeare provides a solution to the competing claims by acceptance of the value of capitalist finance.

In the same way a phrases like 'a day to raise the thousand-mark ransom that would be necessary to save his life' of *The Comedy of Errors* can also be mentioned in this regard.

C. Inflation:

When inflation struck (which made poverty worse) only the landowners who owned a lot of land made profit off renting their lands out to others to farm. The smaller landowners were losing out on money due to inflation, so many smaller landowners decided to use their land for pastures in order to raise sheep, which was more profitable than renting out their land to farmers. Since the smaller landowners stopped renting out their land, many farmers were put out of work and had to look for jobs in other places and most of them went to the cities looking for jobs. Because of the large number of sheep that were being raised in England, its biggest export and industry was wool. There was around 10 million sheep being raised in England, which was about 4 times the population of England at that time.

D. Sources of earning:

Despite agriculture, for people living in rural areas in majority, the other source of income included production of clothes out of wool. Most of the wool was processed into cloth at workers homes, most women spun and carded wool at home as an extra way of making income. The wool was sold to other countries in Europe so they could use it as raw material and make it into clothing and other things.

People who didn't live in rural areas lived in market towns which contained five hundred to five thousand people and others lived in big towns (only about eight percent of the population) with populations over five thousand people. Most of the people who lived in towns worked as craftsmen and tradesmen. Since there was almost no industry at that time, craftsmen and tradesmen were needed to make finished products such as furniture, clothes, and shoes. Hence, the most common of the craftsmen and tradesmen were shoe makers, tailors, bakers, smiths, weavers, smiths and carpenters. Other jobs included going into

servant-hood, becoming a sailor, becoming a soldier, and becoming a peddler, whose job was to buy goods from one place and sell them elsewhere. The craftsmen and tradesmen would usually work in the upper part of their house and make the ground floor of their house the shop. An apprentice would work with a master craftsmen or tradesmen in order to learn a special skill. In exchange for the apprentices work the master would give him a place to stay and a small amount of money.

In this regard, some of the phrases from his plays worth mentioning are as follows:

- “raised by a kindly Shepherd” and “attend a sheep-shearing in disguise”- (*The Winter’s Tale*)
- “separated from him years ago in a shipwreck’ and ‘identical twin slave named Dromio’- (*The Comedy of Errors*).
- ‘Athenian craftsmen’ and ‘ass-headed weaver’ (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*)
- “Celia dresses as a common shepherdess and calls herself a young shepherd named Silvius”-(*As You Like It*).
- “A Poet, Painter, and Jeweler come to Timon’s house”- (*Timon of Athens*)
- “off the coast, a storm has caused a terrible shipwreck.” – (*Twelfth Night*)

E. Market Conditions:

The cost of clothing, furniture and other goods were expensive since they were handmade and not mass produced like today. People would try to make these goods last as long as possible. Some people made a living off buying old clothes and items, fixing them up and then resell them at markets. People could sell their goods that they made or foods that they grew at markets. There were well over six hundred market towns in England, but most of the markets in the towns were very small. At times there would be special fairs, which was a big market that lasted for a short period of time, and many people would go there to buy and/or sell goods at the big markets. One of the biggest special fairs in England was the Stoubridge fair, which lasted for three weeks and included items such as food, spices silks, charcoal, brass, and many other goods. Some buyers would come and buy goods at markets or special fairs in order to sell them in other countries in order to make a small profit.

F. Condition of Women:

Women were an important part of the economic life in England. Women did most of their work at home. If the family had animals, the women were responsible for taking care of them, she was also responsible for making butter, cheese, and collecting eggs. Women would also spin cotton, cook, mend clothing, clean, educate their children, go to the market to buy and sell goods, and sometimes when the men needed help, the women would go out and help on the fields. Generally, the women would not take part in deciding who they would marry. It was generally decided for them and they would follow suit. Shakespeare in his plays has described about women with many angles. There are descriptions of women bold enough enthusiast like men (as maid, shepherdess etc.). He has also praised intelligence of women and in many plays women saves the situation by her intelligence. However, this intelligence is shown by representing her in disguised form as that of man.

Following are some of the phrases from the plays worth mentioning:

- “Hero’s serving woman” – (*Much Ado About Nothing*)
- “Celia dresses as a common shepherdess and calls herself Aliena.” And “Audrey, a goatherd, he intends to marry”- (*As You Like It*)
- “she wishes, she could go to work in Olivia’s home” – (*Twelfth Night*)
- “Helena, the low-born ward of a Spanish countess, who is rejected, owing to her poverty and low status”- (*All’s Well That Ends Well*)
- “she gets work in a reputable house, educating girls”- (*Pericles*).

G. London as England’s Economic Capital:

London was the biggest city in England, at that time, and was located in the southeast, which was considered the richer section of England while the northwest part of England was considered as the poorer section of England. By the 1580’s ninety percent of England’s foreign trade was composed through the ports that were in London. London was a center for business and it attracted lawyers, merchants, businessmen, poets, playwrights (which included William Shakespeare as well) and anyone else who

was looking for success. Lots of people who had no work outside of London went to London hoping to find work.

In this regard some of the narrations from the plays worth mentioned are as follows:

- “The king of France, who has courted Cordelia (i.e.Princess of England)”– (*King Lear*)
- “reaches Macduff in England”- (*Macbeth*)
- “the daughter of the British king”- (*Cymbeline*)
- “after pirates attacked his ship, en route to England”- (*Hamlet*)

H. Foreign Trade:

England’s industrial products and techniques were not as good as those found in other nations of Europe during that time. England relied heavily on other countries for certain exports such as writing paper, good-quality glass and silk. England’s natural resources included coal tin, iron, lead, and wood, and they traded these products to other countries. Since England was surrounded by water, it had many good harbors which made it easy for England to trade with other countries. Because of this one can find the references of many not only European countries but others which are out of Europe in his works. Similarly, he has also mentioned about the dangers faced like that of storms and pirates and loss thereby. He has also mentioned about the imperialism and colonization due to foreign trade.

Following are some of narratives from the plays which explore England’s foreign trade and its foreign relations with different economies of Europe, Asia and Africa. The plays also narrate the ups and downs in the foreign relations mentioned sometimes by friendly behaviours with foreigners and sometimes by war like situations.

- “his own money, all invested in a number of trade ships, that are still at sea.” –(*The Merchant of Venice*)
- ‘a challenger to the throne, who is gathering forces in France’- (*Richard III*),
- I am arrived for fruitful Lombardy, The pleasant garden of great Italy.”- (*Love’s Labor’s Lost*)
- Narrations of Athens, India and Amazon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

- “the prince of Morocco (Africa)”-(*The Merchant of Venice*)
- “Castle in Denmark” - (*Hamlet*)
- “he had lent the horses to three German lords”- (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*).
- “Scottish King Duncan” and “one from Ireland, led by the rebel Macdonwald, and one from Norway.”-(*Macbeth*).
- “Mark Antony, one of the three rulers of the Roman Empire, spends his time in Egypt”- (*Antony and Cleopatra*) the play also deals with the politics of imperialism and colonization.”

I. Shakespeare’s Own Earning Sources:

William Shakespeare was able to make his money through entertainment. He wrote plays and had them performed in the Globe Theater, which was located in London. He would make money off his theater by accommodating all the social classes by charging a minimum admission charge as little as a penny to the common laborer who would not as good of a view as someone in a higher social class who’d pay more for admission to the theater. By 1596 Shakespeare’s income and status has grown briskly. He solidified this status by buying a huge manor house in Stratford. Over the next many years he continued to act, write, and became a shareholder of a theater. He was respected by the literary community of the day and was solidly a part of aristocratic society. He also part-owned another London theatre and a production company. In his hometown Stratford he invested widely in land and property, and reportedly bought and sold grain.

By the time Shakespeare died on 23 April 1616 - 400 years ago on Saturday - he was a very wealthy man. In today’s money he would have comfortably been a millionaire.

5. Conclusion:

Shakespeare’s own economic view-points and reactions are revealed in many of his works eg. *Macbeth*, deals with importance of the limits of ambition, *The Tempest* describes workplace rivalry. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* explores business transformation, while the *Merchant of Venice* emphasizes on contract enforcement.

However, one important thing which can be noted

and observed in his work is that, the centre-point was always humans and therefore humanism. Time and again he has praised this aspect. In his own words-

“There is a tide in the affairs of men,

Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;

Omitted, all the voyage of their life

Is bound in shallows and in miseries” — (*Julius Caesar*)

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