

Question: Discuss Aphra Behn's *The Rover* as a Restoration comedy that explores themes of gender, sexuality, and power. How does Behn use wit and disguise to critique the patriarchal society of her time?

Ans: Aphra Behn's *The Rover* (1677) stands as one of the most significant works of the Restoration period—not merely because it is a lively, witty comedy of intrigue and manners, but because it boldly asserts a woman's voice in a literary and social milieu dominated by men. Set in Naples during the Carnival, *The Rover* dramatizes a world of masks, masquerades, and mistaken identities, through which Behn interrogates the conventions of love, desire, and power. Written at a time when women were often silenced both in art and society, Behn's play is both a celebration of sexual freedom and a critique of the gendered double standards of Restoration England.

Restoration Context and Behn's Position

The Restoration period (1660–1700) was marked by a revival of the theatre after the Puritan ban. The comedies of this era—those of Wycherley, Congreve, Etherege, and Dryden—often depicted libertine heroes, witty dialogues, and sexual intrigue. However, these plays usually presented women as objects of desire or moral restraint. Aphra Behn, one of the first English women to earn her living by writing, subverted these conventions. In *The Rover*, she presents female characters who desire, speak, and act with agency—characters who navigate a society that both entices and endangers them. Behn's own experiences as a woman writer and former spy for Charles II informed her awareness of the intersections between gender, power, and survival.

Plot and Structure

The Rover follows two parallel plots that intertwine through mistaken identities and carnival mischief. The main plot concerns the sisters Florinda and Hellena, noblewomen confined by their brother Don Pedro's patriarchal control. Florinda wishes to marry her beloved Belville, while Hellena, destined for a convent, seeks adventure and sexual experience. Their encounters with the roving English cavaliers—particularly the charming yet reckless Willmore, the “rover” of the title—set the stage for a series of comic, romantic, and near-tragic entanglements. The

subplot involving the courtesan Angellica Bianca further deepens the play's exploration of love, commodification, and betrayal.

Gender and Power

At the heart of *The Rover* lies a fierce critique of patriarchal authority. Florinda and Hellena's brother, Don Pedro, attempts to control their destinies—marrying Florinda to an old rich man and forcing Hellena into a convent. Their rebellion represents Behn's challenge to the idea that women's lives must be dictated by men. Behn allows her heroines to seize control through wit, disguise, and erotic play.

Hellena, for instance, defies her prescribed chastity and enters the Carnival masked, where she pursues Willmore with intelligence and daring. She reverses traditional gender roles by taking initiative in courtship, teasing Willmore with lines like, "I'll see if you'll be as constant a lover as you are a rover." Her wit places her on equal footing with the male libertine, showing that female desire need not be silent or shameful.

Florinda's story, however, reveals the darker side of female vulnerability. Despite her wit and virtue, she narrowly escapes multiple attempted rapes—by Willmore, by Blunt, and nearly by her own brother. Behn's inclusion of these scenes unsettles the comedic surface of the play, exposing how easily male "libertinism" becomes violence. The attempted assaults force the audience to question the morality of the Restoration rake, revealing that the celebrated masculine freedom of the age was often exercised at the expense of women's safety and dignity.

Wit, Disguise, and Carnival

The Carnival setting is crucial to Behn's feminist strategy. During Carnival, social hierarchies are suspended—slaves masquerade as nobles, women as men, and courtesans as gentlewomen. The mask becomes both a symbol of liberation and deception. Through disguise, women can explore identities denied to them in ordinary life. Hellena's masquerade allows her to speak openly with Willmore; Angellica Bianca's portrait, displayed as an advertisement, becomes a mask of desirability that hides her emotional vulnerability.

Behn uses wit and disguise not simply for comic intrigue but as tools of subversion. In the Restoration theatre, wit was a marker of social intelligence and sexual power. Her heroines wield wit as a weapon against patriarchal control. Unlike the silent or submissive heroines of earlier comedies, Hellena and Florinda engage in verbal battles that assert their intellectual equality. Behn thus turns the Restoration ideal of wit—a masculine prerogative—into an instrument of female empowerment.

Sexuality and Commodification

Through the character of Angellica Bianca, Behn examines the commodification of female sexuality. Angellica is a courtesan whose beauty is literally priced at “a thousand crowns.” She sells access to her body but desires genuine love. When Willmore seduces and abandons her, Angellica’s anguish exposes the hypocrisy of male libertinism. Behn portrays her neither as a mere fallen woman nor as a comic stereotype but as a tragic figure caught between passion and economic necessity. Angellica’s rage—“Is this the constancy of men?”—echoes across centuries as a protest against the objectification of women.

Behn’s Feminist Legacy

While *The Rover* participates in the conventions of Restoration comedy—wit, intrigue, and sexual play—it also undermines them from within. Behn’s female characters are not passive recipients of desire; they are desiring subjects who negotiate love and liberty in a hostile world. Her portrayal of Hellena’s boldness and Angellica’s pain anticipates later feminist discourses about the politics of desire. By presenting women as witty, sexual, and morally complex, Behn carved out a space for female subjectivity in English drama.

Moreover, Behn’s authorship itself was revolutionary. As Virginia Woolf famously observed in *A Room of One’s Own*, “All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn... for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.” *The Rover* embodies that right—the right to speak, to desire, and to question.

Conclusion

Aphra Behn's *The Rover* remains a landmark in English literature because it transforms the Restoration comedy of manners into a vehicle of gender critique. Beneath the laughter and masks lies a profound inquiry into freedom—sexual, social, and artistic. Through wit and disguise, Behn exposes the contradictions of a society that celebrates male liberty while policing female virtue. Her play does not simply entertain; it unsettles and enlightens, reminding us that comedy, in the hands of a visionary woman, can be a radical form of truth-telling.