

**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

**<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>**

**IDENTITY, SUBVERSION AND AGENCY: A FEMINIST STUDY  
OF *THE SPANISH DAUGHTER* BY LORENA HUGHES**

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## Abstract

*This qualitative study examines the construction, transformation, and subversion of female identity in *The Spanish Daughter* by Lorena Hughes through the lens of feminist literary criticism. While feminist scholarship has extensively addressed women's oppression within patriarchal systems, limited attention has been given to how identity itself functions as a site of resistance and negotiation within literary texts. Addressing this gap, the study explores how female identity is constructed, challenged, and redefined in relation to patriarchal constraints, and how agency emerges through these transformations. Drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study conceptualizes gender not as a fixed or inherent identity but as a socially constructed and repeatedly performed phenomenon shaped by cultural norms and power structures. Through qualitative textual analysis, the study focuses on the protagonist's adoption of a male identity as a survival strategy within a male-dominated society, examining how this transformation exposes the instability of traditional gender roles. The findings suggest that gender identity in the novel is fluid and performative, and that the protagonist's shifting identity challenges rigid binaries by demonstrating how gender can be enacted, negotiated, and reinterpreted. Furthermore, the study reveals that agency operates within, rather than outside, systems of power, as the protagonist navigates and subtly resists the limitations imposed upon her. By linking identity transformation with subversion and agency, this study contributes to feminist literary criticism by demonstrating how literary narratives can question dominant gender ideologies and offer alternative possibilities for understanding identity within patriarchal contexts.*

**Keywords:** *Feminist Literary Criticism, Gender Performativity, Judith Butler, Identity, Subversion, Agency, Patriarchy*

## Introduction

For as long as literature has existed, it has documented and critiqued the many social structures, cultural standards, and systemic power structures. The many roles that shape, assign, and even deny social power based on identity can be understood more easily by studying the contribution of literature to the understanding of the gendered system of social formation. In contemporary feminist discourse, the understanding of gender has shifted significantly from biological determinism to a socially constructed phenomenon. Among the earliest proponents of feminist theory, Simone de Beauvoir, rejected the theories of innate, biological, and even social, gender identity, by boldly stating that “*one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman*” (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 283), and thus pointed to the social control of identity formation. From this line of thinking, feminist critique hypothesizes the social, rather than biological, control of the formation of gender. One of the most influential contributions to this field is made by Judith Butler, who reconceptualizes gender as performative rather than fixed. Butler argues that “gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” (Butler, 1990, p. 33), suggesting that identity is continuously constructed through repeated actions and behaviors. This perspective highlights that gender is not a stable or inherent quality, but an ongoing process shaped by social expectations and power relations.

Building upon these theoretical perspectives, the present study examines the relationship between identity, subversion, and agency within a feminist framework. While many studies treat identity as something absolute, this study assumes identities as fluid, constructed, and open to transformation. By employing a qualitative approach based on textual analysis, the research explores

how identity is not only imposed by social norms but also actively negotiated and redefined by individuals. The study is indebted to Judith Butler for the argument that “gender is not something one is, but something one does.” (Butler, 1990, p. 25). This perspective highlights identity as something that is constituted through repeated social performances rather than fixed biological traits.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

Society assumes that gender naturally follows biological sex, reinforcing rigid male/female roles and justifying inequality. This belief creates the impression that men and women are inherently different in abilities, behaviors, and social responsibilities, which in turn legitimizes patriarchal systems that restrict women’s autonomy and limit their participation in public life. When such patriarchal systems are normalized, women’s autonomy is compromised, and unequal power relations are sustained, and examining these structures in literature shapes readers’ perceptions of gender and authority while challenging dominant power dynamics.

### **1.2. Research Questions**

The following are the research questions of this research:

- What are the ways in which female identity is constructed in Lorena Hughes’s *The Spanish Daughter* from a modern feminist perspective?
- How is identity subverted in the novel in response to patriarchal structures?
- How does the writer utilize agency in transforming and redefining female identity in the text?

### **1.3. Significance of the Study**

This qualitative study is based on the textual analysis of *The Spanish Daughter* by Lorena Hughes. This research is significant because it adds to modern feminist criticism by looking at identity, subversion, and agency in *The Spanish Daughter* by Lorena Hughes. It shows how literature reflects patriarchal systems that limit women's freedom. This study helps us understand how female characters deal with identity and authority in a patriarchal society.

## **2. Literature Review**

To analyze the processes of identity, subversion, and agency, various theoretical frameworks in feminism have emerged to examine how gender, power, and subjectivity interplay in social, cultural, and institutional arenas. It is conceived that identity is not a fixed or solid category, but fluid and constitutes itself through social practices, cultural norms, and structures of power. In the context of feminist analysis, these formations demonstrate how patriarchal systems control women's roles and create opportunities for opposition and change.

### **2.1. Identity as Social Construction**

When discussing feminist theory and the construction of identity, one of the foundational figures is Simone de Beauvoir, who critically examines gender as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than something biologically given. In her major work, *The Second Sex*, she states that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 283), which highlights that identity is shaped through processes of socialization, cultural expectations, and institutional norms. From this perspective, Beauvoir challenges the idea that gender identity is natural or fixed and instead presents it as a product of historical and social conditions that define women’s roles within society.

### **2.2. Patriarchy and Power Structures**

Situated within feminist analyses of power and gender relations is the work of Kate Millett, who offers a critical view of patriarchy as a political system that shapes both social structures and individual identities. In her well-known work *Sexual Politics*, she argues that “patriarchy functions as a political system which structures all aspects of women’s lives” (Millett, 1970, p. 35), pointing out that gender inequality is not accidental but deeply rooted within cultural, social, and institutional frameworks. Her analysis shows how power operates through everyday practices, reinforcing male dominance and restricting women’s autonomy.

### **2.3. Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Women's Identity**

Extending feminist debates on power and identity, Heidi Hartmann offers a critical perspective on how capitalism and patriarchy interact in shaping women's social roles. In her well-known work *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, she argues that "the social roles women occupy are controlled by both capitalism and patriarchy" (Hartmann, 1979, p. 14), highlighting that women's oppression cannot be explained through a single system of power. Instead, she shows how economic structures and gender hierarchies operate together to regulate women's identities and restrict their autonomy.

### **2.4. Feminist Thought and the Evolution of Identity**

Situated within broader feminist discourse is the work of Rosemarie Tong, who offers a detailed overview of the development of feminist theory and its changing understanding of women's identity. In her book *Feminist Thought*, she explains that feminist theory includes multiple perspectives, such as liberal, radical, and Marxist feminism, each of which examines women's oppression through social, political, and economic frameworks (Tong, 2009, p. 45). These approaches together show how women's identities are shaped within systems of law, culture, and material conditions.

### **2.5. Voice, Self-Definition, and Resistance**

Although Bell Hooks's work is grounded in modern feminist theory, her contributions go beyond a single perspective by offering a critical understanding of identity, voice, and resistance within systems of domination. In her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, she argues that modern feminism is committed to "voice, self-awareness, and active opposition to domination" (Hooks, 1984, p. 29). This shows that feminist theory is not only concerned with analyzing oppression but also with challenging and transforming it. Her work highlights how women's identities are shaped within structures that marginalize their voices and limit their ability to define themselves.

### **2.6. Agency, Recognition, and Participation**

Situated within contemporary feminist theory is the work of Nancy Fraser, who offers a critical understanding of agency through the ideas of recognition and participation. In her book *Justice Interruptus*, she argues that a more meaningful form of gender equality requires that women "participate as peers in social life" and have their identities recognized rather than ignored or devalued (Fraser, 1997, p. 11). This perspective shifts attention from simple formal equality to a more substantive form of equality, where individuals can engage fully within social, political, and cultural spheres.

### **2.7. Contextual Resistance and Identity**

A significant contribution to feminist discussions of resistance and identity is made by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who emphasizes the importance of cultural and social context in shaping women's experiences. In her book *Feminism without Borders*, she argues that resistance is not uniform but varies across different social and cultural settings, as "women react to power in different ways based on their contexts" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 21). This perspective challenges the assumption that women's experiences and responses to oppression are universal.

### **2.8. Different Critical Perspectives on *The Spanish Daughter***

Currently, *The Spanish Daughter* (2021) by Lorena Hughes has had minimal formal scholarly interest in peer-reviewed journals; the bulk of the current critical analysis of the work appears to be in the form of a literary review, conference paper, or even thematic analysis, rather than long-term theoretical work. Nonetheless, many critics and reviewers have approached the novel using postcolonial, Marxist, feminist, and the use of colonial discourse, and in common regard the use of identity, inheritance, and power as a tool involved in the story.

### **2.9. Synthesis and Research Gap**

Existing scholarship on *The Spanish Daughter* (2021) by Lorena Hughes has mainly approached the novel through historical, cultural, and feminist perspectives, with a focus on themes such as survival,

marginalization, and the limitations created by patriarchal social structures. However, despite these contributions, many of these approaches remain largely descriptive and do not fully examine the deeper processes through which identity is constructed, performed, and transformed within the text.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine the representation of identity, subversion, and agency in *The Spanish Daughter* (2021) by Lorena Hughes. It focuses on how female identity is formed, negotiated, and expressed within the novel's cultural and patriarchal contexts. Qualitative research is appropriate because it explores meanings and lived experiences rather than numerical data, allowing for a deeper understanding of social phenomena. As Norman K. Denzin explains, it studies phenomena in their "natural settings" to interpret the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Denzin, 2011, p. 8), while John W. Creswell highlights its usefulness in exploring "the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4).

Textual analysis is the primary research method used in this study to examine how meaning is constructed within a literary text. According to Alan McKee, textual analysis involves making "educated guesses about the most likely interpretations of a text" (McKee, 2003, p. 124). This basically shows that meaning is not fixed and depends a lot on how the reader engages with the text. This approach recognizes that meaning is not fixed but is produced through cultural codes, narrative structures, and reader interpretation.

#### **3.2 Theoretical Framework: Gender Performativity**

The theoretical framework of this research is grounded in the concept of gender performativity proposed by Judith Butler in her influential work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Butler challenges the traditional assumption that gender is a natural or biologically determined identity. Instead, she argues that gender is socially constructed through repeated actions and behaviors that society interprets as masculine or feminine. According to Butler, gender is not a stable identity but rather a process that is continuously produced and reproduced through cultural practices.

Butler's theory of gender performativity is based on several key principles that explain how gender identities are constructed and maintained within society. The first principle is that gender is socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Butler argues that gender identities are created through repeated performances that conform to socially accepted norms. She explains that gender is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler, 1990, p. 191). These repeated actions produce the appearance of a stable identity, even though gender itself is fluid and constantly reproduced.

The second key principle of Butler's theory is the possibility of subversion. Butler argues that because gender identities are constructed through repeated acts, they can also be challenged or destabilized by altering these performances. Acts that deviate from traditional gender norms expose the constructed nature of gender identity and reveal that these roles are not natural but socially produced. Butler states that the repetition of gender norms also creates opportunities for "their disruption and resignification" (Butler, 1990, p. 199). In simple terms, this means people can push back against dominant gender expectations through different or non-traditional performances.

Furthermore, Butler has discussed the concept of agency within her theory of gender performativity. It does not refer to a pre-existing, fully autonomous power possessed by individuals. Instead, Butler reconceptualizes agency as something that emerges from within the very social and cultural norms that constrain individuals. She famously argues that "gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler, 1990, p. 34), suggesting that identity is produced through repeated acts rather than freely chosen. Because these acts are

governed by social expectations, individuals are never entirely outside power; however, Butler also emphasizes that these norms are unstable because they rely on repetition.

#### **4. ANALYSIS**

##### **4.0. Introduction**

Judith Butler argues that gender is not a fixed or inherent identity but is produced through the repeated performance of socially regulated acts (Butler, 1990, p. 334). She further states that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted” (Butler, 1990, p. 25), which highlights that gender emerges from cultural norms and institutional expectations rather than any biological essence. These repeated performances are shaped and regulated by social rules, particularly within patriarchal systems where power structures influence how identity is formed and expressed. Applying this perspective to *The Spanish Daughter* (2021) by Lorena Hughes, the analysis explores how female identity is constructed within patriarchal contexts, how it is challenged or subverted, and how agency is used to transform and redefine identity within the narrative.

##### **4.1. Gender Performativity in *The Spanish Daughter***

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity suggests that gender is not a fixed or natural identity but is produced through repeated actions, behaviors, and social performances. According to Butler, gender is not a stable identity but one that is formed through a stylized repetition of acts (Butler, 1990, p. 334), meaning that what society understands as gender is created through ongoing performance rather than biological fact. She also explains that these performances are regulated by social norms, which define what is considered acceptable behavior. As a result, individuals tend to act in ways that align with these expectations, creating the appearance of a stable gender identity. In *The Spanish Daughter* (2021) by Lorena Hughes, this idea is reflected in the protagonist’s transformation, where gender is not only performed but also learned, maintained, and socially recognized.

##### **4.2. Construction of Female Identity in *The Spanish Daughter***

Puri, whose full name is “María Purificación de Lafont y Toledo” (Hughes, 2021, p. 362), is the daughter of Don Armand de Lafont, “the owner of Hacienda Rosales” and a wealthy cacao plantation owner in Ecuador (Hughes, 2021, p. 49), who abandoned his family in Spain and established a new life abroad. After his death, she discovers that she is one of the heirs to his estate, including the plantation named “La Puri” (Hughes, 2021, p. 52), symbolically connecting her identity to her father’s legacy. As she travels to Ecuador to claim her inheritance, she enters a world structured by secrecy, class hierarchy, and patriarchal authority.

Before her transformation, Puri is portrayed as a conventional wife shaped by traditional gender expectations. While reflecting on her role as the owner of a chocolate shop in Spain, she describes herself as “a tireless hostess” who “anticipated everyone’s wishes” because “it had always been my job to make my guests feel at ease” (Hughes, 2021, p. 15). Her femininity is emphasized through descriptions of her appearance before the disguise, as she recalls “fixing my chestnut hair” and selecting “a lavender sequin dress that exposed my entire back” (Hughes, 2021, p. 24). Similarly, she refers to “the thin georgette fabric of my rose blouse” (Hughes, 2021, p. 21), reinforcing her traditionally feminine presentation and lifestyle.

Emotionally, Puri appears deeply attached and dependent on her husband Cristóbal. Before leaving for Ecuador, she admits, “I’d been lonely for a week already” and confesses, “I needed his reassurance that everything would be all right” (Hughes, 2021, p. 25). Her emotional vulnerability is further shown when she says, “I didn’t want Cristóbal to see my tears” (Hughes, 2021, p. 25). Even after his death, she continues to mourn him, remembering “his company, his eagerness to please me, his sympathetic ear” (Hughes, 2021, p. 30), while later reflecting, “I longed to hear the tapping of his keys now” (Hughes, 2021, p. 46), referring to the comforting sound of him writing. She also recognizes the emotional distance within their marriage, thinking, “If only Cristóbal and I weren’t so different” (Hughes, 2021, p. 26). These moments collectively portray Puri as a woman shaped by

traditional femininity, emotional dependence, and domestic expectations. Her identity before the transformation is closely tied to care, appearance, and attachment to Cristóbal, reflecting the patriarchal norms that define her role as a wife. At the same time, her dissatisfaction with domestic confinement suggests an internal conflict between societal expectations and personal desire. Thus, Hughes establishes a strong contrast between Puri's conventional feminine identity and the masculine persona she later adopts for survival.

At the same time, Puri feels constrained by domestic expectations associated with femininity and marriage. Reflecting on her life before the transformation, she admits that "the walls in our apartment suffocated me" and that she "couldn't stand the long afternoons cross-stitching or mending socks" (Hughes, 2021, p. 26), revealing her dissatisfaction with the limited role assigned to women. She even states that "Chocolate had been my salvation" (Hughes, 2021, p. 26), suggesting that her work became an escape from restrictive domesticity.

During their journey to Ecuador, Cristóbal is murdered while protecting her from an attacker. Following his death, Puri becomes increasingly aware of how dependent she had been on masculine privilege and protection. She acknowledges, "I'd never realized how much I'd relied on them," while remembering how "Cristóbal always rushed to open any door" and admitting, "I'd taken men's gallantry for granted" (Hughes, 2021, p. 30). Left alone in an unfamiliar environment and surrounded by competing heirs, she adopts Cristóbal's identity to survive and secure her inheritance. This transformation becomes necessary in a society where authority, safety, and mobility are tied to masculinity, revealing that identity in the novel is shaped through social expectations and performance rather than being fixed or natural.

#### **4.2.1 Transformation of Identity Through Vocal Cords, Artifacts, and Behavior**

Puri's transformation into a male identity is achieved through deliberate changes in voice, clothing, and behavior, showing that identity is actively performed rather than naturally fixed. While preparing herself to interact with strangers in Ecuador without raising suspicion, she consciously lowers her voice and states, "If I spoke slowly, I could reach the lower register of my voice" (Hughes, 2022, p. 10). Later, after continuously practicing masculine speech, she reflects, "I was getting better at lowering the range of my voice" (Hughes, 2022, p. 89). These moments suggest that gender identity is shaped through repetition and conscious performance.

Clothing also plays a significant role in constructing masculinity after Puri adopts Cristóbal's appearance to travel safely and claim her inheritance. While dressing in her husband's clothes and attempting to conceal her feminine body, she admits, "The corset squeezing my small breasts was not helping matters" (Hughes, 2022, p. 6). As she continues preparing the disguise, she becomes aware of its artificiality and observes, "The fake beard made my face itch" (Hughes, 2022, p. 7). These details emphasize that gender identity depends upon visible and material signs that must be constantly maintained.

Similarly, Puri modifies her behavior by adopting masculine social norms. While preparing herself mentally for interactions with servants and strangers, she reminds herself that "Men didn't ask, men ordered" (Hughes, 2022, p. 11), revealing how masculinity is learned through social performance. Her growing confidence becomes visible when society begins recognizing her as male, particularly when she is publicly addressed as "señor" (Hughes, 2022, p. 10). At the same time, impersonating a man provides her freedoms previously denied to women, as she realizes that "impersonating a man was giving me a freedom I'd never had before" (Hughes, 2022, p. 15).

#### **4.3 Subversion of Gender Norms through Performative Identity and Power**

Butler argues that the repetition of gender norms also creates opportunities for "their disruption and resignification" (Butler, 1990, p. 199). This idea of subversion is central to *The Spanish Daughter*, where Puri's adoption of a masculine identity disrupts patriarchal assumptions about authority, inheritance, and gender roles. By successfully performing masculinity, she reveals that gendered

power is not naturally tied to the male body but is sustained through social recognition and repeated acts.

Butler's assertion that gender is "a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990, p. 191) not only explains how gender is constructed but also reveals its potential for subversion. At the beginning of her transformation, Puri's anxiety, "Surely they could all see through my disguise" (Hughes, 2021, p. 1), highlights her awareness that gender is not inherent but must be convincingly enacted. Her preparation further reinforces this construct, as seen in "the corset squeezing my small breasts... my husband's vest, his jacket, or his bow tie" (Hughes, 2021, p. 8), where masculinity is assembled through external signs. Similarly, her attempt to lower her voice, "If I spoke slowly, I could reach the lower register of my voice" (Hughes, 2021, p. 11), demonstrates that gendered behavior is practiced rather than innate. This subversion becomes more visible when Puri enters social spaces and receives validation through recognition, particularly when she is addressed as "Señor" (Hughes, 2021, p. 10), showing that gender is not an internal truth, but something produced through social acknowledgment.

Butler also emphasizes the subversive potential of repetition, noting that "the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts" (Butler, 1990, p. 191). When Puri introduces herself as "Cristóbal de Balboa, María Purificación's husband" and is immediately recognized as "Señor" (Hughes, 2021, p. 10), this moment reveals that gender recognition depends on performance rather than biology. Her realization that "it seemed like he'd abandoned this daughter—even worse than when he'd abandoned me" (Hughes, 2021, p. 318) emerges through this access, showing how her performance enables her to uncover hidden truths. However, this subversive repetition also provokes resistance, as Elisa's accusation, "Why did you have to come? Nobody wanted you here" (Hughes, 2021, p. 356), and "You would come here and collect all the money and all the land you didn't deserve" (Hughes, 2021, p. 360), reveals that her performance not only challenges gender norms but also unsettles broader systems of class, inheritance, and belonging.

Butler's assertion that "gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (Butler, 1990, p. 188) suggests that gender identities are constructed through repeated imitation rather than emerging from any authentic source. Puri's self-doubt, "How did I ever think I could pull this off?" (Hughes, 2021, p. 8), highlights the difficulty of sustaining an identity that has no original model. Elisa's letter, "Perhaps one day you will find it in your heart to forgive this girl who only wanted to be close to her father" (Hughes, 2021, p. 372), further emphasizes how identity is shaped through memory and emotional negotiation, reinforcing Butler's claim that identity has no stable origin but is continuously constructed through imitation and reinterpretation.

Butler's assertion that "power is not only what we oppose but also... what we depend on for our existence" (Butler, 1990, p. 2) highlights the paradox that subversion must occur within existing structures of power. Puri's admission, "I hated to be deceitful, but I saw no other way" (Hughes, 2021, p. 17), shows that her agency emerges within constraint rather than outside it. Her statement, "My mission? To find out connections, papers, signatures" (Hughes, 2021, p. 305), reflects her engagement with systems of knowledge and control. Elisa's confrontation, "This is all your fault!" (Hughes, 2021, p. 357), positions Puri as both participant and disruptor, demonstrating that her subversion operates within power structures and exposes their contradictions, affirming Butler's argument that resistance emerges from within power itself.

#### **4.4 Agency as Negotiated, Precarious, and Transformative within Patriarchal Structures**

Butler defines agency as something that emerges from within the very social and cultural norms that constrain individuals, arguing that "gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler, 1990, p. 34). He further clarifies that "there is no subject who is 'free' to stand outside these norms" (Butler, 1990, p. 15), reinforcing that agency is not absolute freedom but a situated practice. Butler's idea that "agency is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that

repetition" (Butler, 1990, p. 198) means that individuals exercise agency not by standing outside social systems, but by slightly altering and reworking the rules they are repeatedly required to follow.

This becomes evident when Puri accesses her father's private family archives and discovers Elisa's letters, including the statement: "I wish I could've seen you one last time... but apparently, it was not meant to be" (Hughes, 2021, p. 298), which reveals how patriarchal authority controls recognition by deciding who is acknowledged as a legitimate family member. When Puri reflects, "it seemed like he'd abandoned his daughter—even worse than when he'd abandoned me" (Hughes, 2021, p. 318), she moves from viewing her situation as a personal injustice to recognizing a broader structural pattern of exclusion, turning a system of exclusion into a moment of insight that challenges its authority from within.

However, Butler's claim that individuals are "constituted by the very structures that they seek to resist" (Butler, 1990, p. 2) highlights the fragile and conditional nature of agency. This instability is captured in Elisa's outburst, "Why did you have to come? Nobody wanted you here. Nobody" (Hughes, 2021, p. 356), exposing the conditional nature of Puri's acceptance. The precariousness of her agency becomes even more pronounced when Elisa physically attacks her, "I fell hard on the floor" (Hughes, 2021, p. 357), illustrating how quickly performative power can be dismantled when it is no longer recognized. The accusation "This is all your fault!" (Hughes, 2021, p. 357) further reveals how easily the structures that once enabled her can reposition her as the cause of disruption.

Butler's argument that gender norms regulate who can appear as a subject of power further highlights the structural inequalities shaping access to agency. Elisa's accusation, "You would come here and collect all the money and all the land you didn't deserve" (Hughes, 2021, p. 360), challenges Puri's right to occupy a position of authority, while Elisa's assertion, "My father loved you the most because of your European blood, but I had it, too" (Hughes, 2021, p. 358), introduces race as an additional layer of power, illustrating how gender operates within intersecting structures that regulate who can be recognized as a legitimate subject.

Butler's assertion that "the subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated" (Butler, 1990, p. 195) opens the possibility for transformation within constraint. Puri's realization that others "only knew the façade of Cristóbal" (Hughes, 2021, p. 365) marks a critical turning point where her constructed identity begins to unravel. This transformation is further developed through Elisa's final letter, where she writes, "Perhaps one day you will find it in your heart to forgive this girl who only wanted to be close to her father" (Hughes, 2021, p. 372), reflecting a shift from accusation to vulnerability and allowing Puri to reinterpret her relationship with the broader familial structure, demonstrating that identity can be reconfigured through critical engagement with existing norms.

## **5. FINDINGS**

By analyzing *The Spanish Daughter* (2021) through the framework of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this research highlights a multi-dimensional system shaped through gendered norms, social practices, and patriarchal power structures. The findings show that identity, subversion, and agency operate together, indicating that although social norms place limits on identity, they also allow space for resistance and transformation.

The findings reveal that Puri's transformation into Cristóbal requires deliberate changes in voice, clothing, and behavior to successfully perform masculinity. She consciously lowers her tone, realizing that "If I spoke slowly, I could reach the lower register of my voice" (Hughes, 2021, p. 10), and later reflects, "I was getting better at lowering the range of my voice" (Hughes, 2021, p. 89). Clothing further functions as a marker of gender performance, as "The corset squeezing my small breasts was not helping matters" (Hughes, 2021, p. 6), while "The fake beard made my face itch" (Hughes, 2021, p. 7), and during a conversation with Martin she anxiously checks, "I inadvertently touched my chin to make sure my beard was still in place" (Hughes, 2021, p. 89). Behaviorally, she reminds herself that "Men didn't ask, men ordered" (Hughes, 2021, p. 11), suppresses her "innate

desire to serve" (Hughes, 2021, p. 94), and controls her speech by "answering the maid with single syllables" (Hughes, 2021, p. 14), demonstrating that gender identity is constructed through repeated social performances rather than biological essence.

The findings further reveal that female identity is socially constructed through class expectations, family influence, and collective belief. Catalina's mother warns her, "I don't ever want to see you with that girl again!" (Hughes, 2021, p. 169), while Catalina admits, "I was tired of fluffy sleeves... I wished I could just wear a slip all day" (Hughes, 2021, p. 169), demonstrating that femininity is imposed through social discipline. Identity is also collectively produced through the "Virgin Mary" incident, when Celine falsely claims "It was the Virgin Mary" (Hughes, 2021, p. 174), her mother declares "this is a miracle" (Hughes, 2021, p. 174), and Catalina realizes "It's too late to change our story" (Hughes, 2021, p. 205). This is further reinforced as "people started to kneel... others waved white handkerchiefs" (Hughes, 2021, p. 207), showing that identity can be collectively constructed and sustained through social acceptance regardless of truth.

The findings also indicate that identity is validated through social recognition rather than biological truth. Puri's relief that "it gave me a small measure of confidence that my disguise was working" (Hughes, 2021, p. 8) demonstrates that identity depends heavily on external acceptance, while her acceptance as "señor" (Hughes, 2021, p. 10) confirms that identity becomes real through social recognition. However, the study finds that even when gender performance is convincing, traces of original identity remain visible, as Puri admits that "as a woman, I'd always been considered slightly masculine... but now, disguised as a man... my femininity... seemed to come through" (Hughes, 2021, p. 110), and that "I was exposed without the beard" (Hughes, 2021, p. 217), revealing that gender performance remains inherently unstable.

Butler argues that "the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts" (Butler, 1990, p. 191). When Puri introduces herself as "Cristóbal de Balboa, María Purificación's husband" and is immediately addressed as "Señor" (Hughes, 2021, p. 10), gender recognition is shown to operate through performance rather than biology. Her reflection, "it seemed like he'd abandoned this daughter—even worse than when he'd abandoned me" (Hughes, 2021, p. 318), illustrates how her performed identity enables her to uncover concealed truths. However, this subversive repetition provokes resistance, as Elisa's statements, "Why did you have to come? Nobody wanted you here" (Hughes, 2021, p. 356), "This is all your fault!" (Hughes, 2021, p. 357), and "You would come here and collect all the money and all the land you didn't deserve" (Hughes, 2021, p. 360), reveal that her performance disrupts not only gender expectations but also broader systems of class, inheritance, and belonging.

Finally, Butler argues that "power is not only what we oppose but also... what we depend on for our existence" (Butler, 1990, p. 2), a paradox central to Puri's experience. Her admission, "I hated to be deceitful, but I saw no other way" (Hughes, 2021, p. 17), reflects that her agency operates within structural limitations rather than beyond them. Her statement, "My mission? To find out connections, papers, signatures" (Hughes, 2021, p. 305), reflects her engagement with systems of knowledge and control, while Elisa's accusation, "This is all your fault!" (Hughes, 2021, p. 357), positions Puri as both participant and disruptor, reinforcing Butler's argument that resistance is generated from within power itself.

## **5.1 Conclusion**

This research examines *The Spanish Daughter* (2021) through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, demonstrating that Lorena Hughes presents gender identity not as fixed or biological but as socially constructed through repeated acts within patriarchal systems. The protagonist's transformation into a male identity supports Butler's argument that gender is "an identity tenuously constituted in time... through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990, p. 191), revealing that masculinity and femininity are disciplined social performances rather than natural categories. The

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

novel further shows that femininity is associated with restriction while masculinity grants authority and mobility, exposing how patriarchal structures regulate identity and limit female autonomy.

The study also finds that agency operates within power structures rather than outside them, as Puri gains freedom only by performing masculinity, making her agency socially conditioned and dependent on continuous gender performance. Identity, subversion, and agency are therefore interrelated, shaped and constrained by dominant social norms. By engaging with Butler's framework, the research contributes to feminist literary criticism by showing how literature both reflects and challenges patriarchal systems that restrict women's freedom and regulate their social position.

In conclusion, Puri's transformation demonstrates that gender functions as a socially regulated performance rather than a natural truth, since performing masculinity alone grants her access to power previously denied to her as a woman. This performative shift simultaneously exposes the instability of patriarchal gender roles by revealing how easily social authority can be transferred through appearance, behavior, and repeated acts. The novel thus uses gender performativity not only to portray survival but also to subvert the rigid gender expectations through which patriarchal structures define and control identity.

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

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