

## QUEST FOR ALLAH DURING CHILDHOOD: A CASE STUDY<sup>#</sup>

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*In order to investigate the development of the concept of Allah among Muslims, a qualitative investigation was carried out on a woman who describes how her concepts underwent changes from 2 to 17 years. The case history appears to confirm the writers earlier findings that children consider God to be a man as the adults vocabulary suggests.*

“If I had to reduce all educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly” (Ausubel, 1968, p.vi ). In the light of this principle, if we want to teaches children about *Allah* (God), we must ascertain what children themselves know and think about *Allah*. It would be a serious mistake to assume that the child’s mind is like a clean slate on which parents and teachers may imprint whatever they like; children have their own ways of processing and interpreting information about *Allah* which they receive in formal or informal ways from family, community, or school. Adults, including parents and teachers who deal with children on daily basis, may not be aware of children’s style of thinking and knowing. There are several reasons for this. First, children are not capable of articulating their thinking and expressing it systematically. Second, children very early in their lives, learn to hold to themselves from expressing new ideas from fear of ridicule or disapproval from adults. Third, children from an early age learn to verbalize whatever they are taught. Parents and teachers take their verbalization at its face value, not knowing what lies beneath the surface. On the other hand, in order to develop Islamic curriculum and design instructional strategies, it is necessary to uncover children’s concepts of *Allah* from their own vantage point.

The data for this paper have been collected from a woman, Shakira (not her real name) who was blind by birth. When the interviews were conducted her age was 65. But the remarkable fact about Shakira is her wonderful memory. She remembers many events of her childhood, since she was two years of age. The writer interviewed hers several times in order to discuss her concepts of

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*Allah* during her childhood, which she described in details indicating all the changes which took place in her thinking as she grew up. Her narration seems to be an honest and accurate account of her long quest for *Allah*. The writer prepared detailed notes of her account. A condensed version of the same is presented below. This account is presented in the first person as an autobiography. Further, during writing the writer frequently checked with her about details so that there may be no misinterpretation. This complete account was read to her and corrections were made wherever necessary. This account is given below:

### **Shakira's Account of Development of her Concept of *Allah***

Shakira's account of development of her concept of *Allah* may be presented in five phases, i.e., (1) passive learning about *Allah* (2-4 years); (2) considering *Allah* as man (4-7 years); (3) active quest for *Allah* (7-11 years); (4) phase of negative attitude (7-12 years); and (5) phase of positive attitude (7-17 years). These phases are not chronologically separate and distinct. Evidently the last three phases overlap. However, each phase would be described separately in order to simplify the account of an otherwise complex process.

Now we turn first to the earliest phase. The account is presented below in the first person as mentioned.

#### **Passive Learning about *Allah* (2-4 years)**

My earliest memories about *Allah* go to the period when I was two years old. We then used to live in a *Lal Kothi* (a bungalow with red colour) at Lucknow which was far away from the city. I vividly remember all events which happened at *Lal Kothi*. I remember that I used to lie down on cushion with my grandmother who used to sing a lullaby to me

*Allah Allah lorian*

*Doodh bhari katorian*

*Main khaun mera bala khae*

*Dhar kan marorhian*

As she would say, "*Dhar kan marorhian*", i.e., "I will pull Thy ear", she would playfully pull my ear. It is my earliest memory to have heard the word "*Allah*". The word *Allah* meant nothing to me at this time. I am sure that this word "*Allah*" would have been

mentioned in my presence many times. However, I do not remember those days and events. I remember this lullaby and this word “Allah” with it. It is my first impression of this word *Allah*, though the impression is only of sound not of meaning.

Later, my mother made me to memorize a line like this, *Allah ek nabi barhaq, nabi ke char yar beshak*. (*Allah* is one, the prophet is on truth and undoubtedly he had four friends). This line contained the words “Allah” and “Nabi” (Prophet). I learned soon to repeat this line, yet it carried no meaning to me. However, some meaning of the word *Allah* emerged gradually though such meaning was very hazy at first. I would explain development of the meaning of the word “Allah” for me with examples. Whenever I used to get hurt, people would say, “Allah hoo” and breathed air on my arm or leg which would have been hurt. Whenever I would stumble, my mother would say, “Allah Khair, Allah Khair” (may Allah protect the child). Whenever I would try to do something difficult, as climbing on stairs, my mother would say “Bismillah, Bismillah” (Start with the name of Allah). All these words, *Allah Hoo*, *Allah Khair*, and *Bismillah* sounded to me as signs of exclamation. They represented feelings, not meaning. However, when I used to get sick, as I might have pain in an ear or stomach, my mother would say, “Allah would cure it”. When she administered some medicine to me, she would say, “Allah shafi” (*Allah* is the one Who cures). When a girl got hurt, she might say, “Hae Allah”, as if she was calling *Allah* for help. This attracted my attention, though just slightly. I began to get the impression that *Allah* is somebody, who could do something. It may be concluded that during the period of 2-4 years I learned about *Allah* in a passive way. I learned the word “Allah” which meant nothing or little to me. However, gradually I became conscious that it was something but still it was not something important. It was later that I began to attach some meaning to *Allah* though the meaning I attached was different from the meaning which the speaker attached to *Allah*, i.e., I and my mother who talked together about *Allah*, interpreted different meanings of the same word *Allah*.

## (2) Considering Allah as a Man (4-7 Years)

At about 4 years or so a change started taking place. It was not overnight, not a revolution, it was more or less imperceptible. Earlier, while the name *Allah* was mentioned, I attached no meaning to it. I

remember that my mother used to sing a song, it was her favorite song. It contained the words “*Allah*” and “*Muhammad (PBUH)*”. It goes like this

*Hasbi Rabbi JalAllah*

*Mafi qulbi ghair Allah*

*Noor Muhammad SallAllah*

*La Ilah illAllah*

It meant nothing to me. Perhaps it meant little to my mother also. However, it contained the *Kalma* (the Muslims confession of faith) and so she might have been so found of it. However, she used to sing it many times and it was pleasant to my ears. Further, my mother made me to memorize some lines like this. *Allah mera Wahid hai, Muhammad mera shahid hai, Din mera Islam hai, Quran mera iman hai, Janat mera muqam hai, Farishto gawah rahna main sacchi Muslman hun.* (My *Allah* is one, Muhammad is a witness to it. My religion is Islam, My faith is Qur’an, My destination is paradise, O angels be witness for me that I am a true Muslim.)

These are the lines I remember well and these are the lines, which for the first time meant something to me. However, the meaning I attached to *Allah* is different from the meaning which my mother attached to the name “*Allah*”. I considered *Wahid* as another name for *Allah*, as in our culture, people generally carry two names, one which is mentioned in official documents and the other with which people call him in an informal way. I considered *Wahid* (that is *Allah*) and *Shahid* as two brothers. I took for granted that *Allah* was a man. I had no doubt on this point in my mind and so there was no need for me to esquire about it from any person for clarification. The word *Farishtas* (angels) was not familiar to my ears and so I enquired about them from my mother. She explained, “They are servants of *Allah*”. So everything was clearly and completely explained to my satisfaction.

I was taught to pray to *Allah*, that is to ask Him to give something to me that I desired. This made me realize that this man can do something. Thought, as I have explained, I took for granted that *Allah* was a man, I had some confusion about His status. He was respectfully called as *Allah Mian*. At the same time, He was addressed as “*Thou*” which is not a respectful mode of address, and was asked to do some job. This sounded to me as if He was a servant

(May Allah forgive me for such a mistake). So in this way the meaning of Allah as if He was a man.

### Active Quest for Allah (7-11)

As I have mentioned, I considered Allah as a man. However, there was an incident which puzzled me. Once my sister who was two years younger to me asked me, "Who is Allah?" I replied in a carefree style, "He must be a man." Our uncle who was then passing from the room, overheard our conversation and he remarked, "Allah is not a man. Allah is just Allah." It puzzled me, "Allah is not a man. Allah is just Allah." What did it mean? Once, I enquired a woman, "What is Allah"? She replied that "It is a heap of Noor (light)". At this time, our house was under construction. There were several heaps of building material like sand. I and other children used to play on these heaps. I considered Allah to be a heap of noor like that. However, I could not make sense out of such a heap of noor. How could He act? How could such a heap do anything? Once I enquired a maid who sudden to cook food for us about Allah. She informed me that it was "lump of blood". I could not understand this statement either. I knew what was blood. Sometimes I myself used to fall down and get hurt and blood would ooze from my body. I could feel blood. However, I could not understand how there could be a lump of blood which might be Allah. I wanted to have a first hand experience so that I might know Allah personally. At this time I was gradually becoming conscious of extraordinary powers of Allah. This created another problem as explained below.

I had a serious experience at the age of 7 years which made me to think of Allah more earnestly and seriously. I had a brother who was two years of age. He got sick. I prayed to Allah to restore his health. Unfortunately, his health was not restored inspite of all my earnest prayers. His condition deteriorated day by day and finally one day he died. It was a very rude shock to me. I still did not lose all hopes for him. Even after his death, I kept praying to Allah to cure and to send him back to us. My younger sister was quite sure that he would come back to us some day. Unfortunately, our prayers were never answered. After one year, a baby (this time) a girl was born in our family. The death of a brother and birth of a sister puzzled me. Why did Allah do that? Why did He kill and create? Why did He not cure my brother? Because of the bitter experience which shattered my

nerves, my quest for *Allah* took a serious turn. I desired to know Him directly and personally.

I learned that *Allah* had talked to Moses (Peace be upon Him). I wondered, “Why does He not talk nowadays? Why does He not talk to me?: Had He talked to me, I would have known Him myself. I was told that while *muazzin* (the one who summons to prayers) calls *azan* (the summons to prayers), *Allah* Himself joins the *muazzin*, calling *azan* with him. I used to listen carefully to *azan*, trying to identify voice of *Allah* as distinct from the voice of the *muazzin*. Once, I myself called *azan* again and again. While calling *azan*, I would stop all of a sudden with the expectation that *Allah* might continue calling *azan*, not being able to stop so suddenly and I might hear His voice. I tried for hours, yet I could not achieve success and hear His voice. In *milad sharif* (congregation to pay tributes to Holy Prophet), I used to listen carefully to stories of the Holy Prophet Mohammad’s (Peace be upon Him) *mi’raj* (ascent to the heaven) and I longed that I might have such an experience myself so that I may know all about *Allah* and the paradise and hell. Once, I learned that during every *shab birat* (the night when prayers for forgivings are offered) the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) himself visits every house, mounted on a horse. His presence could be identified by light around him and a sweet smell. Further, it was claimed that if any body would make a prayer for something at this time, *Allah* would grant it. I made up my mind to pray, “*Allah* grant me a place in *jannat ul-firdous* (the highest level of Heaven) and do it immediately. “I waited for the Holy Prophet’s visit during two *shab birats* but in vain. Further, from our *moulvi sahib* (religious scholar), I learned that the two angels, *Harut and Marut*, came to the earth and here committed some sin and, therefore, they were made to forget the prayer (or the formula) to go back to the heaven. I wished that I might learn that formula somehow and visit *Allah* in heaven. I also learned that there is *Ism-e-Azam* in the Holy Qur’an and if any body could learn it he or she could make miracles, as turn the clay into gold by the command/permission of *Allah*. Our *moulvi sahib* informed that this *Ism-e-Azam* is *Su’rah al-Ikhlās*. I with other children collected pieces of clay and tried and tried to make gold out of them with the magical power of *Ism-e-Azam*. It did not work. One of our aunts learned about our experience and she blamed our failure on account of our weak faith. She assured us that had with strong faith, the miracle would have happened. Further, I learned from my grand mother that Jesus (Peace be upon Him) used to revive the dead. I enquired her, “How did he do that?”. She explained, “Jesus (PBUH) would simply say, “Get up with the command of *Allah*”, and

the dead would be revived". I was very happy to learn the formula to revive the dead. I was then 11 years old. During this time a baby of one of our relatives died. I with the help of my younger sister tried to revive him. It did not work. Our aunt again blamed our weak faith for our failure. However, I began to lose faith about such stories. Many stories of this sort which involved *Allah* did not inspire my faith, rather they created doubts in my mind. There were a number of factors which [described in the next section] contributed to a negative attitude towards religion and *Allah* on my part, *nauzobilla* (may *Allah* forgive me). However, the point I want to emphasize here is that at the same time there were a number of other factors which contributed to a positive attitude towards *Allah* on my part. Though such phases, negative and positive, overlap in time, however, I would describe them separately for the sake of simplification.

### Negative Phase (7-12 years)

As in the past, a new phase did not emerge suddenly. The negative phase towards religion and *Allah* was also a slow, gradual development (May *Allah* forgive me).

As I have mentioned, the death of my brother had a great impact on me. It shattered my nerves. It made me to think why *Allah* does all that: creates and kills, bewilts and destroys. I began to collect all information about a man's future after death -- his trial in a grave, Doom's Day, resurrection, final judgement, paradise and hell, etc.

I may add here that at the age of about 5 years, I had started to study the Holy Qur'an and other subjects with other children from a *maulvi sahib*. Being blind, I could not read the Holy Qur'an, I was made to memorize *al-hamd* (*Surah alFatiha*) and some other parts of Qur'an. For me, it was a meaningless recitation like a parrot. There was nothing serious and important for me. However, at about 7 years of age a *hafiz* (one who learns the Qur'an by heart) was engaged to make me memorize the whole Qur'an. He from the first day announced his plan of harsh treatment and he in fact made my life a hell with punishments. He started to teach me the Qur'an in the reverse order, i.e., from the last *parah* (commandment). The last parts of the Qur'an contain description of the Dooms Day, heaven and hell, etc. I could not understand the meaning of Qur'an, however, I could pick up some words describing the Dooms Day and life hereafter, heaven and hell. I began to make inquiries from the *maulvi* and other persons. Different people told me many stories from the Qur'an as

well as folklore. Many stories were horrible. It seemed from these stories that *Allah* has an unpredictable temperament. When He is angry, He destroys everything; on the other hand, when He is in good mood, He bestows great favours. I once enquired my mother about *Allah's* creation and then destruction of all that. My mother explained that it was just a fun for Him. A matter of His pleasure. To me, it sounded a horrible state of affairs. The stories of the Doom's Day and hell and heaven, etc., made an impact on my nerves. During the day I would think of them and at night I would dream about them. It effected even my heart beats. In short, my physical and mental health, deteriorated when I was 8 years old. I fell sick. My condition became quiet serious. I was confined to bed for two months. I then used to think about death (of course my own death), and the angel who takes away soul from body, and the two angels who test a person in her grave, and resurrection on the Doom's Day, and heaven and hell. I was so terrified that I did not discuss this subject with anybody. A number of such experiences that I had at this age were of negative character. They were extremely horrible. They contributed towards my negative attitude towards religion. However, there was an experience which made me to revolt. At the age of 9 years, I had memorized a fair part of the Holy Qur'an. I then started to lead ritual prayers of children of my age. However, I was told that as a female, I could not lead prayers. A male *imam* (leader of the congregational prayers) was chosen from among children to lead prayers. That poor fellow even did not know how to offer prayers correctly. It seemed to me as very unfair. I gave up, and stopped offering prayers completely. The negative attitude like this continued upto the 12th year of my age. However, same positive attitude also developed during the same time which I am now describing.

### **Positive Phase (7-17 years)**

The positive phase towards *Allah* also started when I was about 7 years old. This age is an important part of my life as at that time I began to look towards *Allah* from different perspectives. My first positive experience at this age was that I sowed some seeds in the open space in our house. In a few days the seeds germinated and day by day the seedlings began to grow. I was impressed by this event. I began to think that it was beyond the capacity of a human being to make seeds to germinate and plant to grow. It seemed to be an *ayat* or sign of *Allah*. I felt that it was only *Allah* who controlled nature. This kind of idea kept germinating and developing in my mind as a slow



gradual process. When I was 10 years of age, such ideas became more clear and precise to me. I gradually began to understand that it is *Allah* who is creator of every thing. I recognized that a person could not receive complete reward or punishment for his good or evil deeds in this world and, therefore, I accepted the idea of the Day of Judgement and life hereafter. I felt that a good deal of information I had received from differently sources was not trust worthy. At this time I tried to observe carefully different persons to check whether or not they are concerned with *Allah* and fear Him and behave in an honest and up right manner in this world. I was disappointed to note that in fact their real concern was with present life and matters related too this world rather than *Allah*. I felt that such persons may guide or misguide me. I, therefore, decided to accept my own responsibility to judge and decide for myself about matters of faith rather than to depend on any authority. When I was 13 years of age, I studied Maulana Maududi's *Risala Dinyat* (a book about basics of Islamic religion). It made sense to me.

At about 14 years of age I had memorized half of the Holy Qur'an. However, after this age the memorizing was discontinued. In the meantime my elder brother started to learn Arabic. He used to discuss each lesson with me and from him I also picked some knowledge of Arabic with him. When I was 17 years of age, I used to recall some verses from the Holy Qur'an at night and tried to translate myself. The knowledge of the Holy Qur'an I gained in this way had a great impact on me. However, I was handicapped as I could not recall the whole of the Holy Qur'an and I could not read it myself as I was blind. I regretted that I had not memorized the whole Qur'an. However, I could recall many signs of *Allah* as His design as discussed in the Qur'an, e.g., alternation of the night and day, change of seasons, sunrise and sunset, development of full moon from crescent and then its disappearance, the rain from the skies which revives the "dead" earth, etc. I became convinced that it is *Allah* Who control all this with His magnificent design. At the age of 17 years I accepted that *Allah*, whose attributes are described in the Holy Qur'an, could be present everywhere, could do any thing, and would be creator of every thing and He would not have shape like us.

I realized that *Iman mujammil* and *Iman mufasssil* contain a very precise description of *Allah*. I had learned them with Urdu translation at the age of 6 or 7 years. However, at that time such learning had made no sense to me. I may say that it is at the age of 17 years that I accepted Islam in a proper fashion. The format on informal religious

instructions that I have received did not make a favourable impression upon me. My own reflections on the Holy Qur'an guided me. "I, Shakira, thank *Allah* for this. In fact, I have chosen my pseudonym Shakira as I thank *Allah* for His mercy and guidance".

I may briefly state that latter I obtained a copy of the Holy Qur'an in Braille, I myself transcribed in Braille an English translation of the Qur'an, I listen to Qur'an which is broadcasted from radio stations in the home country and abroad, and have a whole copy of the Qur'an in the form of audio cassettes. Moreover, I have acquired a fair knowledge of Qur'anic Arabic and I can translate the Qur'an on my own. *Allah* has guided me to *iman* with the help of these sources.

## DISCUSSION

From the single example of Shakira, we draw some conclusions which may apply to other children. In fact, writer interviewed a number of children during 1986. From these data, he made some interpretations about children's concepts of *Allah*. For instance, he interpret that children consider *Allah* to be a man (Zuberi, 1988, pp. 2, 16, &19). Shakira's account of development of her concept of *Allah* not only confirms this interpretation, it, moreover, provides precise details of the process which seems to be applicable to other children as well. Keeping the two records in view, i.e., Shakira's example as well as previous study of children's concepts of *Allah*, we may conclude as follows:

It seems that concept of *Allah* among children emerges as a result of verbal and nonverbal communications with adults. Children pick up the word "*Allah*" from adults' vocabulary, not necessarily picking up its meaning in the adult's sense of this word "*Allah*". Further, as adults use anthropomorphic vocabulary to describe *Allah*, it suggests to children that *Allah* is a man. However, words are dynamic and not static formulations (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 124), therefore, the meaning of the word *Allah* to children changes as children grow and mature. Moreover, children are exposed to a variety of sources of information about *Allah*, many of which are not authentic, and further, all information from different sources about *Allah* is not necessarily consistent and coherent, giving children different messages which puzzle and confuse them. Further, it may be noted that children do not accept adults' statements about *Allah* on their face value, they do not depend completely on adults' authority,

they themselves test the information which they receive about *Allah* and make their own judgement. Another important point to note is that children's interest in *Allah* is not a matter of mere academic knowledge, they are existentially concerned with *Allah*, that is, they try to relate themselves to *Allah*. It must be stressed here that there would be nothing far from the truth than to suppose that children's mind is like a clean slate on which parents and teachers may imprint whatever they want to teach children about *Allah*.

In the light of the fundamental principle of educational psychology it is imperative to ascertain what children know and think about *Allah* and then to teach them accordingly. The traditional method of Islamic education completely ignores children's understanding about *Allah* from their own perspective. Children's own understanding of *Allah* is not taken to be as a baseline from where to start religious instruction. This is a major short coming. However, in the light of recent data on children's concepts of *Allah*, it is possible to improve both religious curriculum and instructional strategies to teach children about *Allah* in a proper fashion.

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