

“Did Serial Fail South Asian Americans?”

by Aditya Desai

For the past two months, I’ve been quietly tolerating the podcast [Serial](#), Sarah Koenig’s investigation into the 1999 murder of high school senior Hae Min Lee from Woodlawn, Maryland, and her half-assed character study of her convicted-by-law killer, Adnan Syed. I won’t rehash all the details — if you’re reading this, likely you are one of the many who like me, have been feverishly following this story.

But in that time, I’ve been at odds with most friends who I’ve talked to about this, who week-by-week flip-flop over whether they trust Adnan, a Pakistani-American, who so well aligns to both sides of the hyphen. How could such a nice, well-spoken boy be so at peace when speaking from a high-security prison about the murder of his ex-girlfriend?

The entire run of Serial’s inaugural season has been chasing this one elusive reveal, like some punch line, turning it into a modern, intellectual [Law & Order: SVU](#).

Koenig has missed the point entirely: the mystery isn’t whether Adnan committed the murder; but the lives they lived, the faces they showed to the people around them, and why all of them are in such disconnect over why he could or couldn’t be a murderer in the first place.

The oversight has come under fire before, in articles that accuse Koenig and the show of suffering from a blindness of [white privilege](#) and [seeing Asians as model minorities](#), that accuse the show of painting it’s Asian “characters” with broad brushes. But I’d argue in addition to white privilege, Koenig’s bigger fault is quite simply at her job as a journalist — eschewing the human story and instead trying to make a pulp thriller.

In talking to people about Serial, I’ve stressed two points: 1) this murder, heinous and gut-wrenching as it is, is quite normal in Baltimore; and 2) despite Koenig being unable to grasp her own topic, it paints a very familiar painting of what growing up in Baltimore County is like.

Let me make something clear: I’m very biased toward believing Adnan’s innocence. I know Adnan Syed — not personally, but I know exactly where he comes from.

I grew up in Reisterstown, Maryland, a couple towns over from Woodlawn, but ultimately it was all one big neighborhood. In my tweeby teen years, interested in video games and Criterion DVDs, the infamous Best Buy at Security Boulevard was a second home. I attended a magnet middle school for math and science a just a few miles from there.

To put it bluntly, I was not Adnan Syed. But in 1999, he sure was the kind of kid I idolized.

Some of the episodes touched on Adnan’s upbringing in the South Asian family, discussing how at home and in his Islamic community he was a “good boy” — he prayed with the family, showed respect to elders, and was genial towards all.

But Koenig has tried hard to draw dissonance between that and the “other” Adnan at school, with his American friends — a kid that partied, smoked pot, had a secret girlfriend.

Many children of immigrants, South Asian or otherwise, know this double life well. The state prosecution, and increasingly the podcast, used this duplicity as proof of Adnan’s guilty character.

Baltimore is a hard-scrabble place: a mostly blue-collar community, one of racially diverse enclaves that brush shoulders and never quite mix. The cast of the show — spirited litigator Rabia Chaudry, skeezy drug dealer Jay, the soft-spoken cops Ritz and MacGillivray — are people who probably wouldn’t come into contact with each other in any other situation.

And yes, murder is fairly common, as shown in Episode 3 "[Leakin Park](#)." Every year around this time, among the holiday cheer, I have vivid memories of the local TV news almost nightly counting down the calendar, wondering if Baltimore's homicide rate would exceed last year's, if there were more bodies than 365 days in the year. It's the twisted game we Baltimoreans play. Sick as it is, how else do you cope with a place nicknamed Bodymore, Murderland?

Shame on Koenig, who was a reporter at the Baltimore Sun, for seemingly forgetting what sandbox she's playing in. Instead, the deeper she digs the more she's confounded at the contradictions she finds, unwilling to accept this aspect of Baltimore life.

Children of immigrants are used to compartmentalizing their double lives. It's too much bother to explain to family or friends; you just don't cross the streams. You don't tell your friends what religious traditions keep you from the party, just that you can't come. You tell your parents that you're at a "sleepover," when really you're at the club all night. Apologies if I've outed our secrets, fellow brown young people.

This status quo doesn't seem to be enough for Koenig. She's chasing some golden calf that will make the tumblers click and solve something no one could fifteen years ago.

My feeling is that when the final episode debuts this Thursday, she'll be no further than when she started.

It's been apparent from the start; there's very little plotting for a show supposedly echoing classic weekly installment literature. Koenig herself has [admitted she just puts each episode together as more material comes in](#), zipping around from topic to topic: the testimonies, the Asia letter, the floundering Cristina Gutierrez, and the damn payphones. When she runs cold on one trail, she circles back to another, never building an actual narrative. It's a patchwork of evidence that's been exhausted to death.

Episode 10, "[The Best Defense is a Good Offense](#)," features Adnan's grief-stricken mother, still adamant he didn't do it. You can hear Koenig trying to form a polite question that hid her bafflement over why his mother can't entertain the possibility that he could do it. But how could she? A world where her son is a killer is alien to her. Adnan knew well enough to hide his school life in the first place.

Koenig snatches at another thread in the next episode — Adnan stole money from the mosque, another sign of his "bad character," which even the Islamic community shames. But they still pardon him. In their now-iconic prison phone conversations, Koenig suddenly grows apologetic to Adnan about her nosy, rude, accusatory questions (the classic Western politeness of "sorry-I'm-not-sorry"), to which he replies, "If a person can't figure it out, then it's not for me to say."

It's a complex situation that is almost inexplicable at times for all children of South Asian immigrants, and ultimately it's easier to just say, "That's the way it is." Don't say more than you need to, if it keeps the status quo.

So again the question remains, what is it about our society, both for immigrants and homegrown Americans, unwilling to try and figure out this cultural disconnect? Instead, the draw has remained whether or not Adnan is a psychopath.

Is it so hard to think that Adnan was unfortunately caught in a perfect cocktail of societal circumstances that made him an easy scapegoat in a city court that couldn't reconcile that double life? Why is it so easy to take the virtues everyone keeps praising him of, and bend them as a mask for a violent id?

Maybe the last episode will finally grapple with these points. Maybe Koenig has saved that for her money shot. But I'm not holding out for it.