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**Traitors, a  
Mutable  
Lexicon**

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Traitors, a Mutable Lexicon

In the 1980s, television in Dhaka was a sterile broadcast box. There was one government channel (Bangladesh Television), starting at six in the evening and ending at midnight with a fluttering flag over Tagore’s national anthem. Programming formats were prescribed, and even to sing on one of the variety shows, you had to pass an exam to become a “registered artist.” The nightly English-language program was usually a “remaindered” show on delayed recycling routes (*High Chaparral* and *The Wild Wild West* on a twenty-year time lag). This tedium of evening viewing finally cracked open with the inauguration of best-selling novelist Humayun Ahmed as a television dramatist.

Ahmed was the most successful novelist of postindependence Bangladesh, tapping into a new appetite for stories about the city’s middle class – as opposed to the staple of a romanticized, idyllic village life that perhaps never existed. Following his literary success, Ahmed began to write serialized plays for television. One of his most popular characters was a naming device in the figure of a talking parrot. In the inaugural episode, the bird was being trained to say “*Tui Razakar!*” (You are a wartime collaborator):

**Mrs. Shah:** Are they dead?

**Peon:** How could they not die? Listening to that one tape recording [of “*Tui Razakar!*”] all day, their brains are out.

**Mrs. Shah:** Aha ...

**Peon:** One is still alive, just dozing.

**Mrs. Shah:** He hasn’t learned any of the words?

**Peon:** A child takes two years to learn to speak, and this is only a bird!

**Khalil (entering):** Project abandoned. Where did he get these donkey birds? All that effort gone to waste ... Mrs. Shah, actually, a bird is a hollow fruit. Pretty on the outside, nothing inside.

**Dulabhai (comes near the bird):** Is this the bird?

**Bird (screaming):** *Tui Razakar! Tui Razakar! Tui Razakar! Tui Razakar!*

**Dulabhai:** That ... that ... donkey has taught him this word? Of all the things to teach? Get it out of here!

**Bird:** *Tui Razakar! Tui Razakar! Tui Razakar! Tui Razakar!*<sup>1</sup>

In that onscreen family tableau, there was often a new arrival (“*agontuk*”) who was an unwelcome intruder. Each time he would enter the stage, the parrot would scream “*Tui Razakar,*” prompting gales of amusement from the TV audience. Fans applauded Ahmed for popularizing the naming