

## **“The affairs of this world are like the chameleon faeces” : in memory of a poet from Ghana**

**By Mukesh Kapila, Author “Against A Tide of Evil”**

I did not really know Kofi Awoonor and my abiding regret is that now I never will.

I met him briefly when we shared a platform at the press conference to launch the 2013 Storymoja Hay Festival in Nairobi. I recall a dignified elder who instantly commanded the reverence of all in the room. It was only later, after his senseless death in the mass atrocity that occurred at the Westgate Shopping Mall, that I learnt that not only was he a distinguished Ghanaian poet but also a doughty fighter for human rights who had once been imprisoned for standing up to injustice. His influence as a writer, diplomat, and statesman, was very far reaching – well beyond his country - and well beyond Africa.

I was on the platform at the opening event of Storymoja’s general programme delivering a lecture in memory of Kenya’s Nobel Prize winning human rights activist Wangari Maathai, when news broke that an armed attack was in progress just down the road. Ironically, the subject of my talk was “*Why are people so cruel?*”

Just earlier that week, I had been to the Westgate myself. I was safe but as the death toll mounted, my mind wandered to all the other places I had visited – Darfur, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Iraq, Afghanistan – the settings for other mass atrocities witnessed during a lifetime of studying human cruelty.

Of course, there are acres of analysis on who may be responsible for the Westgate terror. But does the commentary really answer the question: *Why do these things happen?* As my restless mind sought some meaning, I turned for inspiration to the poems of Kofi Awoonor himself. In his prescient “**Songs of Sorrow**” he wrote:

*I am on the world's extreme corner,  
I am not sitting in the row with the eminent  
But those who are lucky  
Sit in the middle and forget  
I am on the world's extreme corner  
I can only go beyond and forget*

...

*Let those gone before take note  
They have treated their offspring badly.*

....

*Tell Nyidevu, Kpeti, and Kove  
That they have done us evil;  
Tell them their house is falling...*